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The socio-political influence of rap music as poetry in the urban community

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The socio-political influence of rap music as poetry in the urban community

by

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My Dedication

This Master's thesis is dedicated to my wonderful family members who have supported and influenced me in various ways:

To Martha "Mama Shug" Farr, from whom I learned to pray and place my faith in God, I dedicate this to you.

To Mildred "Ta" Kershaw, from whom I learned the importance of academia, I dedicate this to you.

To Everett "Kuzzin" Kershaw, the man in my life who has taught me how to smile and look at all the positive attributes that life has to offer, I dedicate this to you.

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To my sister Leslie McPhan, a woman who has always shown me unconditional love and independence, I dedicate this to you.

Finally and most certainly, I dedicate this to Sean "Dough" Farr, my brother, who has always shown me how to laugh and look past the obstacles; now comes the time for the Holiday "B!"

Thank you all.

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Preface

Determined and manipulated by historically oppressive and suppressive conditions, black Americans have a history of being faced with the task of communicating through what contemporary populations may term *unconventional means*. Slavery and its practice of maintaining the illiteracy of blacks would allow very few opportunities for blacks to communicate in any other form other than the oral tradition of communication. Though writing was not absent from the black community, it was the oral tradition of black slaves that produced the orations of Frederick Douglass' criticism, which still stands as noteworthy as Ralph Waldo Emerson's *American Scholar*. The testimony of Nat Turner's revolt would act just as moving and inspiring as the revolutionary propaganda of Thomas Jefferson. Regardless of the reference, history plays an enormous part in the development and exposure of black American arts and humanities. Some will maintain that the civil rights period helped bring black church sermons, and its tradition of "call and response" to the forefront, while others may insist that the black intellectual movement of the early 20th century Harlem Renaissance demands a rightful position among the defining moments in the history of African-Americans. No matter the position, it would most certainly be futile to argue against the development and contribution of the black American oral tradition as it gave rise to our nation's literature.

Though the contribution of black literature to the American canon did not take place until the astronomical success of Richard Wright's Native Son, any scholar would support the idea that black literature is rooted in the early oral tradition of storytelling, sermons, chants and music. Henry Louis Gates supports this cultural claim by writing, "African-

Americans nurtured a private but collective oral culture, one they could not 'write down,' but one they created, crafted and shared with each other and preserved for subsequent generations out loud..."[1] These combined oral roots established a strong foundation for subsequent written artifacts such as Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poetry and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." Oral communication in the black American tradition is a form of early literature and expression of political and social rhetoric. In the 21st century, there remains a surviving offspring of the oral tradition while simultaneously existing as a form of contemporary literature. I contend that rap music fits every definition of poetry, which in itself finds a recognized niche in the genre of literature.

Rap, like poetry, is oral and traditionally set at a specified meter, maintains a consistent thought and is created to please the ear as well as the mind. I contend that rap music, just as traditional poetry, stands as not only as a means to express creativity on the part of African-Americans, but it also stands as an artform that addresses an agenda that would stand to spark meaningful dialogue. In Richard Wright's essay, "Introduction: Blueprint for Negro Writing," he explicitly expresses that the untraditional means through which black literature has evolved and is not identical to European-based literature. He also insists that much black writing that existed through the mid-20th century stemmed directly from the sharing of jokes or through "burnt-out white Bohemians" producing stolen or purchased material from needy blacks.[2] Whichever the case, I assert that because of these modest beginnings, black literature has had to choose a different path to legitimacy than "white" literature. Black literature is sprinkled with unconventional characteristics that have helped itself gain a status of legitimacy and cultural reverence, and therefore is compelled to maintain some aspects of those characteristics to retain some black arts authenticity.

One such example of an unconventional approach is through rap music, but a much earlier form of black expression would give rise to the surly lyrics of rap. The Black Nationalist movement of the 1960s would give the American audience examples of protestant literature in the form of essays and poetry that would challenge the established ideologies of all Americans.

During the 1960s Blacks recognized the momentum that they earned during the 1950s protests and began to exploit their new position of political, economic and social power through the literature that was created. In fact in the same essay, "Introduction: Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright expresses that blacks had a sense of duty to take advantage of this unique position of creating and sustaining pure minority art in literature, which is a direct antithesis to the European-accented white American literature.[3] He also stresses that blacks should use such literary art as either a form of protestant rhetoric to challenge the bourgeoisie or as collective tools used for the unification of oppressed persons.[4] I contend that contemporary rap music is this very diverse art form that has and can continue to stand as a form of protest, while simultaneously existing as a supportive base for the solidarity of this entire nation.

Some critics may question the effectiveness of rap music as a means to cross sub-cultural lines. Harlem Renaissance critic, Alain Locke insists in his essay "Negro Youth Speaks," that America welcomes the legitimacy of literature, especially in the form of poetry. He writes, "America listens—perhaps in curiosity at first; later, we may be sure, in understanding."[5] This statement characterized the sheer power and influence of the oral tradition of poetry. If it is presented well and with honesty of the artist, black literature and poetry will entertain, motivate and maintain its audience. Moreover, I contend because of the

influence of the spoken word, black poetry in the oral form of rap music, has the potential to help to change the direction of the nation. Furthermore, quite possibly through the acceptance of this popular art form, the population can continue to repair damage inflicted by slavery that some persons, such as Marcus Garvey and Abraham Lincoln, deemed an irreparable "disadvantage."[6]

The rap group Public Enemy expressed this identical sentiment of healing and reform in the performances that they exhibited. During the apex of their career, Public Enemy would offer the first political critiques of American ideology in the form of rap. By challenging the status quo, Public Enemy also challenged the way their listeners perceived the so-called advantages of integration under bureaucratic influence. In their later music, Chuck D. and the other members of the group offered a more pluralistic, integrationist and collective approach to solving the problems that have historically plagued the disenfranchised citizens in the United States.

Poetry does have its place in history. For centuries, it has existed as tool of influence that has a responsibility to be wielded in a manner to correct the faults of society, as well as to please the ear. Sir Phillip Sidney writes in his "Defence of Poesy" "that none can teach and move thereto so much as poesy."[7] I interpret this as Sidney's insistence that is the responsibility of the poet to maintain a balance between education and entertainment, compelling an initiative to produce an imitative reflection of life or an honest interpretation.

Black literature in the form of poetry is no exception. As an example we can draw from Dunbar's poetry, which oftentimes attempted to portray accurate reflections of the underexposed black community. His poem "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" not only details the nature of Black English vernacular, which is oftentimes prevalent in the black community,

but it also captures the historical cultural interactions and social hierarchy of black and white Americans.

Rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) parallels this approach with their mastery of the black urban dialect. N.W.A.'s performances reflected accurate accounts of some ghettoes, which had been oftentimes portrayed in a skewed, white perspective. In the media, N.W.A. was one of the pioneer rap groups that were able to narrate urban life and the dynamics that took place in relationship to a larger mainstream. By using "authentic" urban language, such groups would let listeners gather an accurate idea of how South-Central Los Angeles related with its citizens, as well as the rest of the nation.

Black poetry also has the responsibility of providing the gauge with which we compare ourselves to our dreams and to each other. With the help of imaginative poems, we create aspirations that help us transcend beyond our condition and create within ourselves a new interpretation of life. Langston Hughes asks in Montage of a Dream Deferred what happens to a dream that is not pursued or allowed to exist? I contend that such a dream does not fester like a sore, nor is melted away. I believe that such a dream is passed on to subsequent generations of writers who aspire the same dreams, yet learn to express and pursue them in different fashions.

Rap artist Tupac Shakur embodied similar dreams as Hughes. Tupac asked the same culturally relevant questions of social concerns through rap music. While presenting his listeners with frequent glimpses of personal emotions, Shakur approached social concerns from an intimate standpoint and would often tackle subjects that were oftentimes considered taboo. Like Hughes' criticism that was viewed through a Cuban perspective detached from the United States, Shakur also viewed American ills through the eyes of the Black Panther

Party. The poetry that both artists created would challenge and spark the dulled interpretation of the inactive and complacent.

Yet, can rap music be considered poetry? I contend that to explore this artistic form of oral expression in any other manner than poetic verse would be a misinterpretation of artistry as well as a very confusing claim to defend. If we as an audience concentrate on what the intent of poetry is, then the majority of critics and literary scholars alike would tend to agree with Sir Phillip Sidney. His idea that poetry exists as a reflection of life through an inherit purpose of entertaining and educating is based in a theoretical argument that has stood for centuries and is still presented as authoritative in fine higher institutions today.

Now, we have to look at what characteristics may describe the audience's definition of poetry. Most educational systems may define poetry as a metered expression of thoughts that may follow a rhyme scheme or which may pursue *free verse*, with unpredictable meter and un-rhymed endings. As a whole, poetry is an abstract art form that may reflect the artist's emotions, thoughts or a retelling of an event. In any case, one concrete definition cannot be expressed nor can it be prescribed to a single form of literature. This flexible perspective is what gives legitimacy to rapped verse existing as poetry.

Rap music fits securely in the aforementioned definition of poetry. As example, Public Enemy is noted of their ability to educate its listeners and challenging the status quo. N.W.A. helped to establish an entire sub-genre of rap music based on the entertaining re-telling of stories and ghetto experiences. Tupac Shakur spearheaded the move to manipulate the genre of rap music to encompass the emotional side of the black community. By combining both conscious and gangsta rap into a more personal art form, Tupac has helped

some disenfranchised persons develop self-worth and cultural pride. I maintain that rap music is a cultural representation of poetry in its most raw form.

Some may attempt to define poetry by cultural egotism. Such a position might go as follows: "What may be considered poetry in one culture may not be considered poetry in another. Rap music may be considered poetry in the black community, but not in the mainstream." This is an illogical argument. Is the Japanese tradition of constructing haikus any more legitimate or any more parallel to the mainstream stream culture than black rap music? Furthermore, if we recognize Japanese poetry as genuine, then why not rap? Culture has little to do with limiting the definition of poetry. As a matter of fact, culture adds to the legitimacy of poetry and its expressive stance.

In "Defence of Poesy," Sir Phillip Sidney compares the use and expression of poetry throughout a number of communities. He insists that between the Turks, Scots, Indians, and ancient Britons, poetry "makes their hard dull wits softened and sharpened with the sweet delights."[8] Sidney is referring to cross-cultural forms of art. To insist that an art form is only legitimate within the producing community suggests that change and adaptation is not possible. Furthermore the integration and borrowing of ideas and the language took place throughout the Greek's historical influence on the Romans, as well as the subsequent Roman influence on Britain. The opposing opinion has no basis for its claim.

Finally, one may ask how the correlation of vulgar rap music can be made with the beauty of poetry? First, I assert that not all rap music is vulgar, just as not all poetry is meant to portray beauty. Poetry is a reflection of life and life as whole is not filled with beauty. Just as there are some rap lyrics that are not appealing to every ear, all poetic verses are not universally heralded. In addition, the poetry of the black-nationalist movement of the 1960s

is a strong precursor to the rap music that is produced today. The following excerpt of a poem by black poet, Jayne Cortez entitled "Suppression," contains language that is a strong example of the same rap music that is deemed pornographic:

> I left my body
> I left the cry in the air to become spectator to my dream
> The cry in the air was my body
> The great pussy pinching throb between my thighs in the nest
> Of pleasure
> Was my whole body
> The pregnant volcano pressing my belly near eruption
> Was my body[9]

Is this stanza of poetic verse more legitimate than some rap lyrics? I challenge the reader that the language of every community lives within its art form. And though language changes, it consistently heralds some of the basic ideas of that culture. As Michael Eric Dyson explains, Black culture lives and dies by language."[10] Yet, I would add that the living culture subsists because of the recycling and rebirth of language.

Rap music is poetry and with that definition comes the responsibility of the author to express just what Locke, Sidney, and Wright direct: to educate, entertain and to help reflect and maintain the culture in which it is written. Whether the gangsta rap of N.W.A. is uttered or the politically charged rhetoric of Tupac Shakur is presented, the language that is spoken and written as lyrics in rap music is identical to the living culture of black people. When an artist embraces all three objectives, there are changes that can occur on levels unimaginable. Yesterday's rap music of Public Enemy, N.W.A. and Tupac Shakur challenged the thinking of an entire race of people. Today, because of the legitimacy of the art and the respect that it earned throughout the years, new artists such as Eminem and Outkast have successfully helped change the racial tension that has plagued our nation for centuries.

Black rap is black poetry.

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Introduction

"Here we have Negro youth, with arresting visions and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow, foretelling in new notes and accents the maturing speech of full radical utterance."
Negro Youth Speaks, Alain Locke

Within the black community, because of the influence of rap and spoken word poetry, the voices that have been previously repressed and somewhat censored are now blared on car stereos, played in social clubs and exploited within mainstream media. Although these voices of rap and hip-hop culture are just as flagrantly striking today as in previous decades, those voices no longer speak to express the call for dogmatic unification and black consciousness. Instead, a great deal of such present day rap artists as Shine, Juvenile, Ludacris and Jay-Z now have seemed to have adopted the very root of capitalist society by way of self-promotion, material wealth and individualism. This present day phenomenon of evolving voices can be successfully explained if the medium of communication can be paralleled with the popular ideology of urban blacks.

Traditionally muted by the self-perception that they have no political voices,[1] blacks have recently established a place to claim as their own; a haven of collective thought and expression. It is my contention that this is the world of spoken word and rap music. Furthermore, upon initial glance at these new expressions of emotions and thoughts, an outsider to the black community may only see a mimicking expression of the poetry from decades ago. Some may insist that the words of Tupac Shakur and Black Ice are only regurgitated expressions of Amiri Baraka and Etheridge Knight set to music and laced with expletives. Others, such as activist C. Delores Watkins and actress Cicely Tyson, have insisted that rap and hip-hop music are no more than outlets for vulgarity and therefore are

not legitimate examples of respectful artistry. In a statement that illustrates such viewpoints, in 1992 Peter Kehoe the head of New York State Sheriff's Association cried that "[rap] has nothing to do with freedom of expression. It has everything to do incredible corporate greed, social irresponsibility and with an incredible lack of taste discretion and sensitivity."[2] Both critiques are somewhat accurate in that the lyrical poetry of the urban environment does respond to the same issues that other poets may have expressed previously. At the same time, these poetic expressions are musically complex and are oftentimes laced in strongly expressed expletives and through graphic violence.

Many scholars and artists such as David Coplan states that the musical expressions of today reflect the struggle for black determination and "an indispensable cultural vitality," through which artists portray and therefore maintain a pure reflection of urban black community and ghetto mentality.[3] It is these expressions of Tupac Shakur, Public Enemy and the former members of N.W.A., all of which are representatives of such black communities, which can accurately reflect the conditions from which the artists were reared. If such assumptions are correct, it would be logical to deduce that rappers, who are poets, reproduce the life of modern day black culture in the lyrical expressions of today. Yet, it is still questionable if these expressions hinder the progression of the black community or if they really allow for another voice. Consequently, it is important to the survival of black Americans that we explore the driving forces of its popular culture.

Since its birth in Bronx, New York in the late 1970s, rap music has been a dynamic medium of communication within the black community. The early works of rap artists, *Planet Rock* (1982) by Afrika Bambaataa and *The Breaks* (1980) by Kurtis Blow, arguably the first political rapper, served as musical expressions of machismo, and bragging rights

within the community. Though his lyrics were simple and sometimes shallow, Kurtis Blow's voicing of the social misfortunes of urban culture earned him a title as one of the founding fathers of rap. Blow's "The Breaks" lyrics are credited with the first rap single to earn gold status:

> If your woman steps out with another man
> And she runs off with him to Japan
> And the IRS says they wanna chat
> And you can't explain why you claimed your cat
> And Ma Bell sends you a whoppin' bill
> With eighteen phone calls to Brazil
> And you borrowed money from the mob
> And yesterday you lost your job
> Well these are the breaks.[4]

With former gang members adopting these early expressions of rap, a change in black social etiquette took the black cultural game of signifying to a new level. Signifying, playing the dozens or siggin,' is a black American cultural game that involves a series of exchanged insults from one player to another. This act of jest is not usually intended to be hurtful, but oftentimes players can get extremely personal. Also, instead of the violent exchanges that plagued urban communities, crews replaced gangs and ultimately incorporated the African-American cultural tradition of signifying or "siggin." This is a practice of hurling verbal insults at opponents as a means to win a rhetorical battle of respect. As words replaced weapons, violence did not fail to stalk those who took part in the rebirth of the new urban poetry. Evident through the deaths of Scott La Rock of Boogie Down Productions in 1986, who was shot in the midst of breaking up a fight during a rap concert and the highly publicized murders of Tupac Shakur in 1996 and Christopher "Notorious B.I.G." Wallace in 1997, violence still remains in the rap industry as a testament to the residual effects of former gang lifestyles. Nevertheless, the late 1970s and the early 1980s were the beginning of the

cult phenomenon that was to become a multi-billion dollar industry and a moving force in the popular culture of America.

The appeal of this new genre of music can be attributed to the popularity of the subjects and the inviting, seductive music that was to accompany the oral tradition of storytelling. Rappers are narrators and artists who construct stories, express emotions and communicate in a rhythmic fashion to music and drum beats. Though it was not initially very popular, rap music gained followers by its ability to appeal to the masses. In the late 1980s, rap permeated many black neighborhoods. Though it was still not widely accepted by whites, blacks adopted its swinging dissing style with the emergence of LLCool J and Kool Moe Dee. 1987 was the first time the signifying game had been played nationwide, and aired over black radio stations and black sanctioned television (e.g., B.E.T.). With the production of Kool Moe Dee's "How Ya Like Me Now?," and LL Cool J's "Jack the Ripper," blacks were amazed at the candor and the talents many artists expressed when speaking in a rhythmic fashion for up to six minutes, while simultaneously making jest of another:

Kool Mo Dee:

> Now brothers all ride me like a pony
> I am no phony I'm the only real mic-a roni
> playing the mic like it supposed to be played
> new jacks you all should have stayed
> out of the business
> what is this
> amateur night at the Apollo?
> Get off this stage
> I'm enraged
> just like a lion
> trapped inside of a cage
> I'm the real king
> and rap is a jungle
> I never understood
> How could one go
> to a party watch me
> stand around and jock me?
> Become a rapper and try to rock
> Scheming like a demon, you're screaming and dreaming

I'm from the old school I used to see men
die for less
but I'm not living that way
I let the mic keep talking and let the music play. [5]

As a response to the challenge that Kool Moe Dee presented, LL Cool J introduced the following string of rebuttals and insults. This was the beginning of one of the first emcee battles that captured fans' attention. LL Cool J proclaims:

"How Ya Like Me Now?" I'm getting busier
I'm double platinum, I'm watching you get dizzier
Check out the way I say my, display my, play my
'J' on the back, behind the Cool, without the A-Y
I love to ride the groove because the groove is smooth
It makes me move and I'll improve
As it goes on, as it flows on
When you see me, don't ask if the show's on
How that sound? Don't come around, playing me close, brown
Pull on my jock to be down
You need to stay down, way down, because you're low down
Do that dance, the prince of rap is gonna throw down
Aiming to please while I'm killing emcees
I'm gonna keep on hitting you with rough LPs
Day after day after day
You're smacked in the face by the bass of Cool J[6]

The secret poetic voices of their community now were not hidden behind literary jargon or confused with the convolution of the beat poets. As Fab 5 Freddy, rap pioneer producer states, "It [rap] opened up a lot of people's ears and mind to some real mind boggling shit."[7] The responsibility of black communication now belonged to the original author and freedom of expression was paramount in the years to follow.

Rap music took off from coast to coast. Styles of rap music were as diverse as the shades of black skin color. By the late 1990s and early 1990s, specific styles of rap music were emerging and they were eventually associated with geographical regions. The politically conscious rappers led by Public Enemy and KRS-One, were as plentiful as the Pan-African traditionalist of the Five-Percenters♠, such as Poor Righteous Teachers and the Brand Nubians. At the same time gangsta rappers such as Ice-T, N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) and the Geto Boys established a stronghold on the consumer base as well.

The fathers of rap, such as Big Daddy Kane, Slick Rick, and Run-D.M.C. on the East Coast, performed with an unsyncopated rhythm that followed no set pace. Unlike traditional spoken word poetry, the stressed and unstressed syllables were not confined to one line or one breath. Instead, the lyrical rhythm could not be anticipated and is not held to the confines of any particular rhythm. The background music that the East Coast rappers used in the late 1980s and the early 1990s consisted mainly of the reggae-like heavy beats of the Caribbean or the funky riffs of soul singer and performer James Brown. Blacks and Puerto Rican-Americans alike utilized island influences to maintain an appealing sound that could cross cultural boundaries and help rap grow in popularity. Rappers Heavy D. and the Boys, and Chub Rock were noted for their sampling of Bob Marley riffs from his hit song "One Love," as well as James Brown's "The Big Payback."

West Coast rappers, on the other hand, set their rhymes to music that was primarily derived from the American tradition of rhythm and blues. Such artists as Snoop Doggy Dogg, MC Eiht, and DJ Quik used samples from such soulful singers as Isaac Hayes and Teddy

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♠ **Five-Percenters**: a religious sect that followed the teaching of the Nation of Islam's founder W.D.Fard. As explained by Fard, 85 percent of the earth was populated by uncivilized people and slaves, 10 percent were made of slave makers who lie about the true teaching of God, and 5 percent who were the black men of Asia; poor righteous teacher, who knew the real living God.

Pendergrass which were key in the lyrical expression of a less staccatoed rap style and exhibited a more laid back slurred style of rap. On the West Coast, rap music was considered quite representative of the black communities south-central Los Angeles.

Subjects of the songs varied from rapper to rapper. Quite often the subjects would range from the hip-hop clothing in Run-DMC's "My Adidas," to the bathroom humor of Biz Markie's "Picking Boogers." Though the purpose of earlier rappers was to "diss" (disrespect) your counterparts, rap became a voice of the black community and was used to communicate within the culture and subsequently to the few white listeners that would accept it.

By the late 1980s, rap music was so popular and a lucrative commodity that New York based MTV could not ignore its success. In 1986, the production of a new program, "Yo MTV Raps", showcased rap music, the hip-hop culture and gave birth to its crossover popularity. Such rap artists as Fab Five Freddy and Ed Lover saw this nationwide broadcast of black music as a tool to exhibit not only talent through music videos and personal interviews, but also as a means to express black culture and social concerns. With such East Coast artists as Kris Parker (KRS-One), Queen Latifah and Chuck D of the group Public Enemy, rap began to take on a political agenda that surprisingly mimicked the black arts movement of the 1960s. Adopting the label of conscious rappers, these artists addressed social tensions such as education reform and biblical accuracy. Queen Latifah, in particular, produced a 1994 Grammy award wining song entitled "U.N.I.T.Y." that address the rap's growing trend of misogynic lyrics.

Often clothed in black berets, and military fatigues, these new poets of the ghetto such as KRS-One, Public Enemy and The X-Clan, took on the role of education and cultural awareness in the black community. The previous practice of "dissing" and self-promotion

took a back seat to African-like chants and new messages that would be used to force America into recognize black urban culture as a legitimate contributing subculture of America. These rappers quite often chronicled black history, while attacking white negative stereotypes about African-Americans. KRS-One for example, ingeniously performed "You Must Learn" a rap roll call that would highlight black historical figures:

> I believe that if you're teaching history
> filled with straight up facts no mystery
> teach the student what needs to be taught
> 'cause black and white kids both take shorts
> when one doesn't know about the other ones' culture
> ignorance swoops down like a vulture
> 'cause you don't know that you ain't just a janitor
> no one told you about Benjamin Banneker
> a brilliant black man that invented the almanac
> can't you see where KRS is coming at
> with Eli Whitney, Haile Selassie
> Granville Woods made the walkie-talkie
> Lewis Latimer improved on Edison
> Charles Drew did a lot for medicine
> Garrett Morgan made the traffic lights
> Harriet Tubman freed the slaves at night
> Madame CJ Walker made a straightening comb
> but you won't know this is --- you weren't shown
> the point I'm gettin' at it might be harsh
> 'cause we're just walkin' around brainwashed
> so what I'm sayin' is not to diss a man
> we need the 89 school system
> one that caters to a black return because
> you must learn.[8]

This rap style was labeled "conscious rap" and it began a new movement towards Afrocentric thinking and anti-assimilationism. Though the lyrics were still expressed in the unsyncopated style, they harbored a political edge that had never been expressed in the new poetry of the black community. Conscious rappers regularly expressed revolutionary sentiments against the status quo of the white establishment.

Public Enemy, a group led by college educated Chuck D, pioneered the conscious rap movement in 1986. Adorned with paramilitary apparel, Public Enemy crept up the rap charts using underground radio airplay and appearances on college campuses. Gradually, white media took notice to the growing popularity of the group and its seemingly anti-American lyrics. The following sample of "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos," is exemplary of the lyrical sentiment that was expressed in Public Enemy's earlier albums:

I got a letter from the government
The other day
I opened and read it
It said they were suckers
They wanted me for their army or whatever
Picture me given' a damn - I said never
Here is a land that never gave a damn
About a brother like me and myself
Because they never did
I wasn't wit' it, but just that very minute...
It occurred to me
The suckers had authority
Cold sweatin' as I dwell in my cell
How long has it been?
They got me sittin' in the state pen
I gotta get out - but that thought was thought before
I contemplated a plan on the cell floor
I'm not a fugitive on the run
But a brother like me begun - to be another one
Public enemy servin' time - they drew the line y'all
To criticize me some crime - never the less
They could not understand that I'm a Black man
And I could never be a veteran
On the strength, the situation's unreal
I got a raw deal, so I'm goin' for the steel

They got me rottin' in the time that I'm servin'
Tellin' you what happened the same time they're throwin'
4 of us packed in a cell like slaves - oh well
The same motherfucker got us livin' is his hell
You have to realize - what its a form of slavery
Organized under a swarm of devils
Straight up - word'em up on the level
The reasons are several, most of them federal
Here is my plan anyway and I say
I got gusto, but only some I can trust - yo
Some do a bid from 1 to 10

And I never did, and plus I never been
I'm on a tier where no tears should ever fall
Cell block and locked - I never clock it y'all
'Cause time and time again time
They got me servin' to those and to them
I'm not a citizen
But ever when I catch a C-O
Sleepin' on the job - my plan is on go-ahead
On the strength, I'ma tell you the deal
I got nothin' to lose
'Cause I'm goin' for the steel

You know I caught a C-O
Fallin' asleep on death row
I grabbed his gun - then he did what I said so
And everyman's got served
Along with the time they served
Decency was deserved
To understand my demands
I gave a warnin' - I wanted the governor, y'all
And plus the warden to know
That I was innocent -
Because I'm militant
Posing a threat, you bet it's fuckin' up the government
My plan said I had to get out and break north
Just like with Oliver's neck
I had to get off - my boys had the feds in check
They couldn't do nuthin'
We had a force to instigate a prison riot
This is what it takes for peace
So I just took the piece
Black for Black inside time to cut the leash
Freedom to get out - to the ghetto - no sell out
6 C-Os we got we ought to put their head out
But I'll give 'em a chance, cause I'm civilized
As for the rest of the world, they can't realize
A cell is hell - I'm a rebel so I rebel
Between bars, got me thinkin' like an animal
Got a woman C-O to call me a copter
She tried to get away, and I popped her
Twice, right
Now who wanna get nice?
I had 6 C-Os, now it's 5 to go
And I'm serious - call me delirious
But I'm still a captive
I gotta rap this
Time to break as time grows intense
I got the steel in my right hand
Now I'm lookin' for the fence

I ventured into the courtyard
Followed by 52 brothers
Bruised, battered, and scarred but hard
Goin' out with a bang

Ready to bang out
But power from the sky
And from the tower shots rang out
A high number of dose - yes
And some came close
Figure I trigger my steel
Stand and hold my post
This is what I mean - an anti-nigger machine
If I come out alive and then they won't - come clean
And then I threw up my steel bullets - flew up
Blew up, who shot...
What, who, the bazooka was who
And to my rescue, it was the S1Ws
Secured my getaway, so I just gotaway
The joint broke, from the black smoke
Then they saw it was rougher than the average bluffer
'Cause the steel was black, the attitude exact
Now the chase is on tellin' you to c'mon
53 brothers on the run, and we are gone[9]

Though Public Enemy's popularity emerged as yet another voice to express dismay with the growing gap between the upper middle class and the lower class, rap music often conveyed somewhat of a more violent exhibition of aggression that pushed the American psyche to its limits. On the West Coast, such production companies as Death Row Records began to make a push towards a more violent but just as political critique of the social hierarchy in America. This poetry expressed by such leading groups such N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) and solo artist Ice-T met the world of white oppression with narratives of ghetto life and survival. Although some songs such as "Gangsta, Gangsta" and "Pimpin' Ain't Easy" were often seen as pornography, these street-wise artists used expressive language that was thus far considered taboo in the music industry. In addition, "Dope Man,"(1988) N.W.A.'s first hit single, narrated the story of the rise of crack cocaine in the black community. While performing the story of how a crack dealer was murdered for distributing drugs to a gang member's sister, N.W.A used such words as "fuck," "shit", "pussy" and "bitch" to shock its audience:

It was once said by a man who couldn't quit,
"Dope man please can have another hit?"
The dope man said, "Cracker I don't give a shit,
if your girl kneels down and sucks my dick."
It all happened and the guy try to choke her.
Nigga didn't care she ain't nothing but a smoker.
That's the way it goes, that's the name of the game;
Young nigga getting over by slangin' caine[10].

This language was a long stretch from the astonishing use of the word "sperm" in Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in the late 1970s. While the language was vulgar and somewhat abusive, it told a powerful yet controversial story of black urban life and was to serve as a prophetic announcement of so-called "gansta rap."

Rap music gave some the autonomy to cry in public without feeling emasculated or ignored. In fact, everyone seemed to be listening, including the prying ears of the F.B.I., who sent formal warnings to rap group N.W.A.[11] The striking pose that early rappers exhibited called for larger audiences, louder forums, and more politically charged themes. Such themes seemed to follow the protest works of the 1960s when calling for unity and harmony among black people. Equipped with historical texts and the rhetoric of Elijah Muhammed's Message to the Black Man and Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, including the literature of Amiri Baraka, Cornell West, and Molefi Asanti, the new poets were dangerously vocal and armed with new media technology to carry their messages to the masses.

Because of the popularity of such new media outlets as MTV, Black Entertainment Television (BET) and urban radio stations across the nation, soon an entire population of young persons followed a new renaissance of black ideology and nationalism. Sales of rap music skyrocketed and many young blacks began to dress the part of Black Power. In addition to the popularity of the Malcolm X paraphernalia in the early 1990s, such as caps

and tee shirts with the letter "X" emblazoned on them, it would not by uncommon to witness black men and women adorned in Kente cloth (a traditional dress of Ghana, Africa, usually brightly colored and hand-woven patterns of windowpanes or other geometric shapes) with leather medallions, shaped in the continent of Africa dangling from their necks. Many youths were attracted to a new black movement represented by rap music that reflected a redefining of African-American heritage, as Death Row and N.W.A. seemed to successfully accomplish.

Like Public Enemy, N.W.A. addressed modern problems of the black community. But in contrast to Public Enemy, N.W.A. seemed to offer no sense of hope or call for change. Yet, because of the raw style of rapping and expression, many black youths immediate gravitated to the meaningful lyrics that hit closer to home. The popularity of gansta rap grew as record sales skyrocketed as opposed to the dying trend of conscious rap in the East Coast. Such hip hop artists as Tupac Shakur initially began their careers as conscious rappers or rappers without a political agenda. Yet Tupac began to adopt the image of thugs and gangsters that seemed so successful throughout the nation. For Tupac Shakur, it was the beginning of a bumpy assent to the top, but we will investigate his immortal popularity with generation X.

Tupac's influence was paramount in the new socio-political establishment of young blacks who had fallen victim to not only the racist bureaucracy of the government, but also to the hidden dysfunction of the nuclear family. Tupac's songs such as "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Part Time Mutha," for example, addressed socially taboo issues such as teenage pregnancy, incest, and single parent homes, while simultaneously embracing the establishment of gang lifestyle. Tupac's raps and lyrics were synonymous with the cries of

many young black Americans and they showed after his split from the more comical and less dramatic rap group, Digital Underground. It was Tupac's rhetoric that gave birth to more Tupac-like rappers such as DMX, The Wu Tang Clan, and Spice1.

With the evolution and influence of hip-hop streaking through American homes, there should be no question that it is the new poetry of the latest generation of black poets. Is this medium an accurate reflection of the popular sentiment of the black community? I insist that it is. I assert that rap music and hip hop culture have been the driving force behind not only the musical development, but it also served as a prophetic device in voicing the social standing that blacks have either achieved or been denied. It is the purpose of this thesis to illustrate the importance of the poetic politics of hip-hop and its dynamic influence on the urban culture of black Americans. If the poetry of Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance poets was influential in the urbanization of black Americans during the Great Migration from the south, it is the poetry of rappers and hip-hop artists that seem to define the place of many blacks within contemporary urban community. Is this always a good thing?

If the gansta rap music is indicative of where the urban black community stands today, then my contention is no. The social changes that have been exhibited in the black community such as the increase in drug use, and falling graduation rates may be directly paralleled by the epicurean exhibitionism of gangsta rap figures. Yet, I still assert that positive rap figures and groups such as Goodie MOB, DMX, and Outkast can be just as influential with their encouraging messages of black identity and retention of black American culture.

For example, Goodie MOB, The Good Die Mostly Over Bullshit, addresses political issues without the appeal to thug life or violence. Their accurate depictions and explanations of complex topics such as gentrification, health care and poverty, also cross cultural lines, but they approach each theme with a black Christian spiritual skew. This expression of spirituality reminds the listener of their ethnic concerns as well as personal issues that are not culturally bound. The following excerpt from their debut album, Soul Food, is indicative of the popular trend that some black southern rappers produce and would eventually become the modern day top seller:

> Remember me from way back in the days
> Lived right around the corner from Benjamin Mays
> I'm amazed that we made it this far
> A po' black family is all that we are
> Wishing upon a star for a trace of happiness
> My mama do her best but we ain't makin no progress
> Maybe it's a test that we all gotta pass
> My situation's making me grow too fast
> Thirteen and half years old
> Standing at the bus stop alone in the cold
> On my feet
> degraded for a fee
> To help get my family off the street
> 'Cause that's on me[12]

It is these lyrical expressions of personal experiences and common language that make the new positive rappers of today more appealing. Their style of rap, arguably spearheaded by Tupac Shakur, is of an amalgamation of the political criticism of conscious rappers and the realism of gangsta rap.

Rap is an ever-changing genre that seems to reflect and sometimes prescribe the sentiments of the young black urban community. In the late 20th century, the black community would experience an changing perspective when attempting to discern whether the influence of rap was positive or negative. With the growing popularity of politically

charged rap, young fans of rap continued to push the envelope of expression and new artists would emerge with even stronger messages.

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[1] Earl O Hutchinson, The Assassination of the Black Male Image (NewYork: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 74.

[2] Chuck Phillips, "Police Groups Halt of Record Sales." Los Angeles Times 16 June 1992, F1.

[3] Mary Ellison, Lyrical Protest (Praeger: New York, 1989), 149.

[4] Curtis Blow, The Breaks, (Mercury Records, 1980). Quoted in Tom Terrill, "The Second Wave" in The Vibe History of Hip-Hop ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 45.

[5] Kool Moe Dee, "How Ya Like Me Now," 1987

[6] LL Cool J, Jack The Ripper, "Walking With the Panther," 1987

[7] Havelock Nelson, Bring the Noise (New York: Harmony Books, 1991) XV.

[8] Boogie Down Productions, "You Must Learn," Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-Hop, 1989

[9] Public Enemy, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, 1987

[10] N.W.A., "Dope Man" single release 1988

[11] Carter Harris, "Eazy-E" in Vibe's History of Hip-Hop ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers, 1999), 254.

[12] Goodie MOB, "Sesame Street," Soul Food, 1995

Chapter 1

Public Enemy: Did "The CNN of the Black Community" Move Too Swiftly Towards Idealistic Pluralism?

"There is ample evidence of a New Negro in the latest phases of social change and progress, but still more in the internal world of the Negro mind and spirit."
Negro Youth Speaks, Alain Locke

In the late 1980s, Public Enemy helped pioneer the new wave of conscious rap, yet their lyrics were intricately fashioned after radical speeches and addresses made to the public decades prior. Reminiscent of speeches presented by such political activists such as Asada Shakur and Eldridge Cleaver, manifestos of black nationalism, race relations and social consciousness were in direct contradiction to the growing pluralistic ideology that seemed to be a numbing force against the fire of black nationalism throughout the nation.

One of the more popular advocates of this multicultural pragmatism would have been Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition. The Chicago-based black political organization, Operation P.U.S.H. (People United to Save Humanity), which coordinated the Rainbow Coalition, heralded an agenda that was very similar to the non-violent civil rights platform of the 1960s. In its own manifesto, the Rainbow Coalition called for the abandonment of separatist ideology and demanded a multicultural perspective on the maintenance of social services and citizenship. Jesse Jackson stated in a television address:

> One thing I'm convinced of [is] that working class white people and working class black people and brown people have more in common with each other than they do with those who, in fact, downsize corporations, and what they call right-size, or what some might call downsize and out-source jobs. Wealth going upward benefits and jobs going downward, and jobs going outward, is threatening all of us. And to that extent, I think our whole language has to reflect

more class inclusion.[1]

Though this is an idealistic goal, it was evident through Jackson's failure to gain the Democratic Party's nomination for President in 1984 that the country was not ready to follow his pluralistic plan. America was just ending the Reagan era and historically, the second tyrannical wave of ultra-conservatism was about to affect the nation and hit the black community hard. The first Bush Administration was to continue the Reagan policy of supporting big business while at the same time cutting support for social programs that would help marginalized citizens. In addition, Bush would continue Ronald Reagan's tradition of vetoing civil rights bills, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1990, that would have ensured a more level playing field in job security and economic development.

In the midst of all the politically charged issues that faced this nation, Public Enemy released its sophomore album entitled *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Unlike their first album, *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, this loud rhetoric was nothing like the rap community had heard before in the form of music, yet it resembled strong calls to militancy and black nationalism. Led by Chuck D. and his booming baritone voice, Public Enemy began to set itself apart from the competitive "dissing" tradition of rap music and addressed concerns that much of the black community had encountered for the entire decade of Reganomics and the political agenda of the far right. Public Enemy's mode of communication was politically charged rap music and the nation was about to get a taste of the anger and resentment within the black community for continued practice of marginalization.

Michael Eric Dyson asserts that this form of rap is "a revival of the earlier forms of black radicalism, nationalism and cultural expression."[2] I could not agree more. Like many

radicals who preceded them in the political forum such as Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party and David Perez of the Young Lords, Public Enemy was to give a voice to those that had been muted for decades. The discourse that Public Enemy presented was to address the concerns of those who Amiri Baraka had referred to as the "blues people."[3] These were traditionally African-Americans who have had find no faith in the status quo of white oppression. Public Enemy provides an ideological transition between the political activism and militancy of the 1960s and the cultural expression that is described in Baraka's book Blues People. Baraka characterizes "blues people" as the types of individuals who find their voices in the "unclean" or unconventional expression of black music.[4] Baraka goes on to write, " Negro music is essentially an expression of an attitude or collection of attitudes; a profound expression of human feelings."[5] He finishes with an ambiguous but keen observation when he writes, "The notes mean something; and the something is part of the black psyche as it dictates various forms of Negro culture."[6] Public Enemy established such a forum for such people. Among the convoluted whistle screams, heavy drum beats and the samplings from white media, Public Enemy provides what Dyson accurately describes as a "précis of contained chaos."[7]

Evident through the following lyrics, Public Enemy's audience was purposely bombarded with references to strong figures of the 1960s black nationalist movement. In "Party for Your Right to Fight," Chuck D proclaims,

> Power Equality
> And we're out to get it
> I know some of you ain't wit' it
> This party started right in '66
> With a pro black radical mix
> Then at the hour of twelve
> Some force cut the power and emerged from Hell
> It was your so-called government
> That made this occur

Like the grafted devils they were.

J. Edgar Hoover, and he coulda' proved to 'ya
He had King and X set up
Also the party with Newton, Cleaver and Seale
He ended- so get up
Time to get 'em back –You got it
Get back on the track- You got it
Word from the honorable Elijah Muhammed
Know who you are to be black.

To those that disagree, it causes static
For the original Black Asiatic man
Cream of the earth
And was here first
And some devils prevent this from being known
But you check out the books they own
Even masons they know it
But refuse to show it – Yo
But its proven and fact
And it takes a nation of millions to hold us back.[8]

It is through the very mention of Black Panther charter members and the assassinated leaders of the civil rights movement that Public Enemy drew their audience's attention. "Party for Your Right to Fight" was a song that according to historical critics Dyson, Staples and Chuck D himself, would accurately illustrate the marginalized citizens' concern over oppressive conditions. This black nationalist position is in direct correlation to the ideology of Amiri Baraka, Sonja Sanchez and Haki Madhubuti, formerly Don L. Lee). It was the following type of effective, intelligent discourse presented in Don L. Lee's poem, "One Sided Shoot-Out (for brothers fred hampton & mark clark, murdered 12/4/69 by chicago police at 4:30 AM while they slept)," that consumed the public and warned white America of a state of "crisis":

only a few will really understand
it won't be yr/mommas or yr/brothers or sisters or even me,
we all think that we do but we don't
it's not *new* and
under all the rhetoric the seriousness is still not serious

the national rap deliberately continues, "wipe them niggers
out,"
the questions will be asked & the answers will be the new
clichés,
but maybe
just maybe we'll finally realize that "revolution" to the real-
world
is international 24 hour a day and that 4:30 AM is like
12:00 noon
it's just darker,
but the evil can be seen if u look in the right direction.
were the street lights out?
did they darken their faces in combat?
did they remove their shoes to creep softer?
could u not see the whi-te of their eyes,
the whi-te of their deathfaces?
didn't yr/look-out man see them coming, coming, coming
or did they turn into ghostdust and join the night's fog?
it was mean
& we continue to call them "pigs" and "muthafuckas"
forgetting what all
black children learn very early: "sticks and stones may break
my bones but names can
never hurt me."[9]

In fact, it was the subsequent third and fourth albums of Public Enemy that seem to be influenced by the revolutionary discourse of such poets as Don L. Lee. Public Enemy's lyrics served as catalysts in the cultural development of the new black community. *Fear of a Black Planet*, the third in the sequence, was especially important in that it was produced in order to showcase black mastery of rhetorical communication. In other words, what both albums exhibited were the different layers and issues rap music can address while artists perform before an audience. Public Enemy's lyrics addressed many social ills in very direct manner, yet they also added another dimension of performance by exposing the subversive practice of institutional racism. By incorporating humor, anger and cultural realism, Public Enemy exhibited a command over not only language but also performance.

It has long been accepted among literary scholars that reversed humor or humor that is adopted by the initial target group can actually empower the oppressed.[10] The rhetoric

behind the majority of black humor was to emphasize the potential humor of an oppressive situation. Alvin Poussaint states that "Humor does heal, does keep you going so that you can laugh at your hardships, sustain your impacts, [and] the oppression that you're facing."[11] Many blacks find it empowering to find amusement from so-called street humor, X-rated narratives, or the empowering behavior of trickster characters of such as Richard Pryor's "Mudbone" or the legend of Shine.

Keeping with the tradition of trickster figures who are usually underestimated minorities who seem to live by their wits and outsmart their oppressors, Richard Pryor's Mudbone character is an old man who emigrated to northern states during the Great Migration from Tupelo, Mississippi and was active in many wonderfully amusing stories. Shine was also a character in black American folklore who was said to be the only black passenger on the sinking ship Titanic. Despite being offered bribes and numerous sexual advances, Shine was humorously notorious because he refused to offer assistance to endangered white passengers:

> And the . . .water came above my head."
> He said, "Shine, Shine, set your black self down.
> I got ninety-nine pumps to pump the water down."
> Shine took off his shirt, took a dive. He took one stroke
> And the water pushed him like it pushed a motorboat.
> I'll give you more money than any black man see."
> Shine said, "Money is good on land or sea.
> Take off your shirt and swim like me."
> And Shine Swam on.
> Shine met up with the whale.
> The whale said, "Shine, Shine, you swim mighty fine,
> But if you miss one stroke, your black self is mine."
> Shine said, "You may be the king of the ocean, king of the sea,
> But you got to be a swimming son-of-a-gun to out-swim me."
> And Shine swam on.
> Now when the news got to the port, the great Titanic has sunk,
> You won't believe this, but old Shine was on the corner damn near drunk.[12]

By exploiting such humorous artifacts, Public Enemy once again uses a familiar cultural tradition of black America to convey socially conscious messages through their music. Scholar Ivan Van Seritima writes in his essay, "Trickster: The Revolutionary Hero," that the use of trickster device is quite common in revolutionary literature. He asserts that the trickster character is used primarily because of the "successful transcendence over an oppressive order of relationships."[13] By introducing the trickster figure to the audience, a narrator can manipulate the outcomes of the stories so that the trickster, who is usually a less powerful protagonistic representative of the ethnic group, can assume a role of strength through the expression of wits and trickery, quite contrary to his social expectations.

One of the songs that followed this trend of socially critical discourse was performed by William "Flava Flav" Drayton, who some labeled a buffoon and representative of modern-day minstrelsy. Adorned in his dark glasses, gold teeth and a large wall clock hanging from his neck, Flava Flav epitomized the hip-hop "B-Boy," or break dancing image, while quite often criticizing the lack of social services allotted for minorities. "9.1.1. Is a Joke" and "Night of the Living Baseheads" were both strong social satirical critiques that would attempt to draw the attention of the political bureaucrats to the social ills of the black community, but also draw the attention of the black community itself. Maintaining an accurate portrayal of the trickster figure, Flava Flav emerges from a role as an idiot or fool to display the God-like characteristics of judgment and reform.[14]

"9.1.1. Is a Joke" was an accurate yet satirical rendition of black poets' and humorists' calls for better welfare programs and social services within minority communities. What made "9.1.1. Is a Joke" especially successful was the oftentimes criticized portrayal of the minstrelsy by Flav. It was his use of humor and satire that made this first single off the

third album a huge success in 1990. Though somewhat humorous in its narration and its plot, the following lyrics served as precursors of the defiant or revolutionary tone of the entire album:

> Now I dialed 911 a long time ago
> Don't you see how long they're reactin
> They only come and they come when they wanna
> So get the morgue truck embalm the goner
> They don't care 'cause they stay paid away
> They teach ya like an ace they can't be betrayed
> I know you stumble with no use people
> If your life is on the line then you're dead today
> Late comings with the late comin' stretcher
> That's a body bag in disguise y'all I betcha
> I call 'em body snatchers quick they come to fetch ya?
> With an autopsy ambulance just to dissect ya
> They are the kings 'cause they swing amputation
> Lose your arms, your legs to them its compilation
> I can prove it to you watch the rotation
> It all adds up to a funky situation [15]

The song not only publicizes the private puns that minorities have made about such social services as police and ambulance responses, but it further stakes a claim in humor by sampling jokes and expressions used by black comedian Eddie Murphy in the background. Is it meant to be funny? Most assuredly. Flava Flav, and Shine, as well as other trickster models, are lovable because their "evils" of defiant words, actions of subterfuge, and social criticism liberates black stereotypes rather than supports them.[16] It is also the familiarity of humor that quickly transforms complex rhetoric into a recognizable signifier that a listener can understand and respond to in a positive manner.

Sonja Foss, professor of rhetorical studies, characterizes this expression of interpretation as "...[an act] of transference that places complex concepts in a more natural state where it can be applied."[17] She goes on to explain that practice of encoding is not uncommon in the oral tradition as many African-American stories are conveyed. It is Henry Louis Gates who expands on this concept in his renowned book, The Signifying Monkey,

insisting that the signification or translation of any rhetoric based in oral symbolism transcends the very denotation of the words, and then the message is assigned to a different role.[18] This social encoding is exactly what Public Enemy explores in black culture and academic deconstruction. Public Enemy infuses the two and creates a more complex, yet accessible critique of American values, which can be understood on different cognitive levels.

The reader may ask, what gives Public Enemy an authoritative voice for black minorities? It can possibly be the honesty that they exhibited and the seemingly accurate voice that they used which helped them maintain a sense of credibility. Public Enemy wrote and performed lyrics about such subjects as political exploitation of the black community, lack of social services, poor educational systems, racial stereotyping in the mass media and the growing problem of drug abuse which had historically been muted or confined within the black community itself.

"The Night of the Living Baseheads" also addressed the huge problem of drug abuse in the black community. By 1995, crack cocaine had been circulating through the population for almost ten years and proved to be a very lucrative business for those who would peddle it in the lower class communities. Crack was cheaply manufactured and highly addictive. Therefore, there was a high demand for a product that was readily available. This created a dangerous scenario for the lower class communities, yet very little was being done to legislate laws or enforce the preexisting laws to curb its distribution and abuse. Public Enemy recognized their music as a medium to offer a public service announcement to their listeners. "The Night of the Living Baseheads" harbored lyrics that would not only offer the obvious

criticism of drug abuse, but they would also offer a social critique of the practices of drug dealers as well as the additional crime that stems from drug peddling:

Here it is
BAMMM
And you say, Goddamn
This is the dope jam
But lets define the term called dope
And you think it mean funky now, no
Here is a true tale
Of the ones that deal
Are the ones that fail
Yeah
You can move if you wanna move
What it prove
It's here like the groove
The problem is this - we gotta' fix it
Check out the justice - and how they run it
Sellin', smellin'
Sniffin', riffin'
And brothers try to get swift an'
Sell their own, rob a home
While some shrivel to bone
Like comatose walkin' around
Please don't confuse this with the sound
I'm talking about...BASS

Yo, listen
I see it on their faces
(First come first serve basis)
Standin' in line
Checkin' the time
Homeboys playin' the curb
The same ones that used to do herb
Now they're gone
Passin' it on
Poison attack - the Black word bond
Daddy-O
Once said to me
He knew a brother who stayed all day in his jeep
And at night he went to sleep
At five o'clock in the mornin' all he had was
The sneakers on his feet
The culprit used to jam and rock the mike, yo
He stripped the jeep to fill his pipe
And wander around to find a place
Where they rocked to a different kind of...BASS[19]

This social warning and community assessment of *It Takes a Nation of Million to Hold Us Back* is continually illustrated through songs on the 1990 album, *Welcome to the Terrodome.* Public Enemy, led by Chuck D, also addressed such controversial issues as interracial dating in "Pollywanacraka" and the very volatile subject of Hollywood's practice of black typecasting and stereotyping. In the hit "Burn Hollywood Burn," Chuck D unexpectedly teams up with gangsta rapper, Ice Cube of N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude) and Big Daddy Kane, a popular East Coast rapper with a smooth seductive flow, to detail the racist practices of movie production companies. The following excerpt narrates not only the sense of urgency, but also the passion that all three performers harbor for the issue:

CHUCK D:

Burn Hollywood burn I smell a riot
Goin' on first they're guilty now they're gone
Yeah I'll check out a movie
But it'll take a Black one to move me
Get me the hell away from this TV
All this news and views are beneath me
Cause all I hear about is shots ringin' out
So I rather kick some slang out
All right fellas let's go hand out
Hollywood or would they not
Make us all look bad like I know they had
But some things I'll never forget yeah
So step and fetch this shit
For all the years we looked like clowns
The joke is over smell the smoke from all around
Burn Hollywood burn

ICE CUBE:

Ice Cube is down with the PE
Now every single bitch wanna see me
Big Daddy is smooth word to muther
Let's check out a flick that exploits the color
Roamin' thru Hollywood late at night
Red and blue lights what a common sight
Pulled to the curb gettin' played like a sucker
Don't fight the power, shoot the mother fucker

BIG DADDY KANE:

As I walk the streets of Hollywood Boulevard
Thinin' how hard it was to those that starred
In the movies portrayin' the roles
Of butlers and maids slaves and hoes
Many intelligent Black men seemed to look uncivilized
When on the screen
Like a guess I figure you to play some jigaboo
On the plantation, what else can a nigger do
And Black women in this profession
As for playin' a lawyer, out of the question
For what they play Aunt Jemima is the perfect term
Even if now she got a perm
So let's make our own movies like Spike Lee
Cause the roles being offered don't strike me
There's nothing that the Black man could use to earn
Burn Hollywood burn[20]

The tone of the song is urgent and with the three distinct styles of rapping and language. It is because of the different tones, that the listener is offered different calls to action when dealing with oppression and racist practices. Note that both Chuck D and Ice Cube both seem to appeal to aggressive tactics, while Kane offers a more subdued plan of action. Chuck calls for the community to act as a whole with social unrest and political upheaval. Yet Cube, exemplary of gangsta rap, presents a vigilante approach that in the last line calls for a violent confrontation on a personal level. Kane offers still a different, more conciliatory point of resistance by encouraging the listener to create a new film industry that would produce movies that portrays blacks in a more realistic manner.

In any case, Public Enemy not only presents problems, but they establish credibility with the audience by offering solutions as well. Chuck D. follows this song with strong commentary in his book Fight The Power by writing,

Hollywood's dishonesty, distortions, myths and misconceptions, about Black people as nothing but watermelon stealin', chicken eatin', knee knockin', eye poppin', lazy, crazy, dancin', submissive "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks," ever since D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), all the way up to the 1950's --- which is a forty

> year period of straight-up lies, propaganda, derogatory images, an bullshit --- have been spread across, not only the United States, but the entire world. That has had a major effect not only on how society looks at us, but how we look at ourselves.[21]

It is fiery commentary not unlike the above that earned Public Enemy the widely used title "the CNN of the black community."[22] Public Enemy helped to establish a new channel of communication for the black communities and thereby earned a position of spokespersons and commentators on the oppressive nature of American social structure.

In fact, there had traditionally been a psychological alienation from the "American Dream, " and because of Public Enemy's popularity among college students, and the newly defined generation proponents of multiculturalism and historical accuracy, this denial of social welfare had been brought to the forefront.

Only after Public Enemy prematurely smoothed the biting lyrics of such albums as It *Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* and *Fear of a Black Planet* did the mainstream begin to sense that Public Enemy no longer focused on crises in American culture and as a result came to view Public Enemy as less than a political threat and more as a mere rap group. Chuck D describes his own performance on the "Greatest Misses" (1994) album as, "more laid back in the groove..."[23] Not only did the background music mellow from the screaming sirens and heavy drum beats, but the tone that Chuck presented was also more subdued. Instead of the harsh bass projection from his booming voice that normally set him apart from the other rappers on the circuit, Chuck D adopted a dry monotone projection that lacked many vocal inflections. In fact, it seemed as though the moment the group performed in this manner and expressed concerns that were not exclusive to the black community, the sales plummeted and no longer did they have the appeal that was embraced years prior. With

the subsequent 1995 release of *Muse Sick -N- Hour Mess Age*, Public Enemy seemed to adopt a more critical agenda of black societal tropes. Though Public Enemy continued to follow their established pattern of challenging the status quo, they began to be more critical of the black community without offering the comforting solutions that were evident on earlier albums. I assert that Chuck D. unknowingly insulted the urban culture of black America. After writing songs that embraced black urban culture and denouncing the black bourgeoisie as in the song "Sophisticated Bitch," Chuck D. and Public Enemy seemed to thumb their noses at black street culture with the release of "Godd Complexx":

> Are you ready?
> Uptown, on the corner, uptown
> Uptown on the corner, uptown
> I turn around and hear the sound of voices talkin bout who's goin to die next
> Cause the white man's got a God complex
> Tellin niggas screamin for help (help me, help me, help me, help me)
> Nigga go make your own help
> Shit you need it
> I turn around and hear the sound of jukeboxes playin in bars
> Pimps parked outside in big pretty Flavor Flav cars
> Cleaner than a broke dick dog
> Sittin in a big fine frog
> Dressed very fine and fly in their Calvin Kani♠
> No matter how you flex[24]

By writing such songs, Public Enemy projected an image that would seemingly denigrate urban black culture and its followers. What prompted the change in agenda and target audience? It was not that their former political messages were too fiery or inaccurate. A compilation of events and public pressure forced Public Enemy into a more subdued position and thereby adopted a weaker, softer voice for the black community.

♠ **Calvin Kani**: it is assumed by the author that by combining the names of popular white fashion designer Calvin Klein and popular black fashion designer of hip-hop apparel Karl Kani, Public Enemy is parodying black urban concerns over appearance. Through such songs as this one, and "So Whatcha Gone Do Now?" Public Enemy seemingly attacks some of cultural icons that are associated with urban culture and gangsta rap.

Dyson may have presented the reason for Public Enemy's fall in his article, "Performance, Protest and Prophecy in the Culture of Hip-Hop." Dyson insists that Public Enemy and other politically charged artists should expand their messages to the wider, more general American population.[25] He alludes to this as a responsibility of black artists and authors who find a public arena for performances. He further states in his book Reflecting Black, that black "nationalism needs to be placed into a larger context and dialogue within the African-American culture and the wider American culture so that it can transcend mere racial consciousness."[26] This is a wonderfully idealistic assertion, and it stands as a strong justification for Public Enemy in its change in critical approach in latter years. Yet, I contend that it was because of this semi-assimilationist position that Public Enemy's popularity and influence wavered, as well as the popularity of conscious rap.

As Public Enemy completed their fourth album in 1994, sales slipped dramatically. Some contend that it was the anti-Semitic comments of Professor Griff, one of the more vocal members of the group, that led to the group's eventual demise. I assert that this may be a contributing factor, but as Griff identified himself as a member of the Nation of Islam's policing subdivision, The Fruit of Islam, it might be asserted that the black community could have expected more comments like the following to be expressed. In a 1989 interview with the Washington Times, member of Public Enemy Professor Griff exclaimed that "[Jews]... perpetrate the majority of wickedness across the globe."[27]

Regardless of the speculation that could have been made about the reasons for the group's failing popularity, no one can dispute the actual number of sales that were generated by each album. The following chart illustrates the pattern of success that Public Enemy gained or lost. I contend that it was the milder position taken by Public Enemy with the

media, coupled with the rising sales of confrontational gangsta rap albums that contributed to the group's fall in popularity. As an example of how the sales changed, the Record Industry Association of America reports that all of Public Enemy's albums before 1992, with the exception of their first album, have reached platinum or multi-platinum status. This means that they have sold or shipped more than 1 million copies. Since 1992 only two of the four albums have earned gold status, which translates into at least 500,000 copies sold.[28] This is a huge loss in revenue for the record company as well as the artists.

What Dyson fails to recognize is at the moment black nationalists assume a position where they attempt to appeal to the understanding nature of white culture, they have in a sense lost a great deal of the power of persuasion. It is the critique of the dominant society that gives rise to revolutionary power. Any attempt to appeal to a compassionate side of those with majority power can be perceived as weak and ineffective. This is a basic concept of Malcolm X and other leaders of black nationalism. In Malcolm's 1963 address to Michigan State University he labeled this act of compromise as "unintelligent."[29] In both social and cultural movements it is not accommodationism but the challenge of authority and centrality of the dominant society that retains the attention of both blacks and the mainstream. This gives voice to the crisis facing American society.

This crisis is defined by Houston Baker as "the challenge of global, Western, white male superiority."[30] By the very agenda of Public Enemy and protest literature, the sense of crisis is constructed to compel the mainstream to feel uncomfortable with the injustices that are perpetrated on the minority cultures. The truly empowered persons are characterized as those who challenge the homogeneity of Western culture while simultaneously promoting ethnic recognition. Public Enemy exhibited this mindset for the black community of the late

1980s and early 1990s. Their lyrics mimicked the incessant need for minority communities to challenge the status quo, but also called for a newly established, more inclusive society. Their purpose was to allow the benefits of mainstream culture, but also make an allotment for a reformation or realignment of ethnic values. Consequently, their later music failed to capture the public's attention they earlier had by replacing "crisis" with relatively bland optimism.

Once again, to disagree with the recommendation of Dyson, Public Enemy's appeal to the understanding nature and the softening of lyrics are the primary reasons for its eventual demise. Though Public Enemy continued to address such problems in the black community as the use of the pejorative term *nigger*, police brutality and drug abuse, coupling their lyrics with the white metal rock group Anthrax again disappointed the black community.

Also, as prophetic as it was of the 1991 Los Angeles political uprising, the release of "Shut 'Em Down" on the *Welcome to the Terrodome* album was not enough to erase from the minds of blacks across the nation, the band's unlikely appearance with white mainstream bands during the 1993 and 1995 Lollapalooza Tours. Public Enemy seemed to abandon the tradition of black nationalism for the all-encompassing agendas of bands such as Rage Against the Machine, U2 and Primus. Though Public Enemy performed the same songs that fed their black nationalist sense, their appearance with white bands in front of predominately white audiences turned the stomachs of some charter listeners. In the eyes of many blacks, white America no longer feared the softened position of Public Enemy and therefore had no reason to respect their rhetoric.

Did Public Enemy "sell-out" to the idea of expressing black nationalism by Dyson's suggestion to "transcend racial consciousness?" I think so. Nevertheless, the plan that Dyson

speaks of is rather utopian. What Dyson and Public Enemy have embraced is the theory that Blacks and other oppressed minority groups have to abandon the notion that oppression is racially bound. Instead, it can be assumed that it is ideal of classism that trumps racism in the twentieth century. When presented with the question of why Public Enemy tours with such bands as Anthrax and U2, Chuck D's response is a simple, "Shit, because I can, I'm happy to. I'm trying to know a level that we're trying to bring Rap to, but we're far off."[31]

Again, I assert that this plan of appealing to the established mainstream is very feasible, yet taking into account the political climate that the Los Angeles uprising mirrored, I think Public Enemy was not the group to attempt to portray the unrest during their performances. In fact this amalgamation of black consciousness and blanket social reform would be successfully expressed and accepted by later artists such as Tupac Shakur and DMX. Public Enemy established a listener base with black radicals and to abruptly change the agenda was not only detrimental to the success of the band, but also to the promotion of black social progression by means of popular culture. It would be easy for black listeners to perceive that Public Enemy succumbed to white allies, when in reality, they were too progressive for the era of Ronald Regan and white privilege.

With the leaders of the new revolution defeated by what is viewed by me as an act of assimilation, the rise of conscious rap slowed and the new genre of "gansta rap" began to gain new momentum.

[1] Jesse Jackson, "The Two Nations of Black America," Frontline, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/interviews/jackson.html (12, March 2002).

[2] Michael Eric Dyson, "Performance, Protest, and Prophecy," The Emergency of Black and The Emergence of Rap. Black Sacred Music 5, no. 1 (1991): 24.

[3] Amiri Baraka, New Music, New Poetry, IN-1048 (1981) quoted in Mary Ellison, Lyrical Protest. New York: Praeger, 1989), 73.

[4] LeRoi Jones a.k.a. Amiri Baraka, Black Music. (New York: William Morrow, 1971), 12.

[5] Jones, 13.

[6] Jones, 15.

[7] Michael Eric Dyson, Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1993), 13.

[8] Public Enemy, "Party for Your Right to Fight," It Takes a Nation of Million to Hold Us Back 1988

[9] Don L Lee, "One Sided Shoot-Out" in The Poetry of Black America ed. Arnold Adoff (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 423.

[10] Constance Rourke, American Humor A Study of the National Character (Tallahassee: Florida State Press, 1931), 90.

[11] Larry G. Coleman, "Storytelling and Comic Performance" in Talk That Talk ed. Linda Goss, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 433.

[12] Shine and the Titanic, <http://www.crt.state.la.us/folklife/creole_art_toast_tradition.html>

[13] Ivan Van Sertima, "Trickster: The Revolutionary Hero" in Talk That Talk ed. Linda Goss, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 103.

[14] Sertima, 108.

[15] Public Enemy, "9.1.1. Is A Joke" Welcome to the Terrodome 1990

[16] Sertima, 108.

[17] Sonja Foss, Rhetorical Criticism (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1996), 357.

[18] Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 123.

[19] Public Enemy, "Night of the Living Baseheads," It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back 1988.

[20] Public Enemy, "Burn Hollywood Burn," Welcome to the Terrordome 1990

[21] D.Chuck Fight the Power, (New York: Delta Press 1997), 52

[22] Nelson George, Hip Hop America (New York: Viking, 1998), 82.

[23] Chuck D, 147.

[24] Public Enemy, "Godd Complexx" Muse Sick -N- Hour Mess Age 1995

[25] Michael Eric Dyson, "Performance, Protest, and Prophecy," The Emergency of Black and The Emergence of Rap. Black Sacred Music 5, no. 1 (1991): 16.

26 Michael Eric Dyson, Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1993), 18.

[27] Alan Light, "Public Enemy" in Vibe's History of Hip-Hop ed. Alan Light, (New York: Three Rivers, 1999), 169.

[28] Record Industry Association of America, 24 June 2002, < http://www.riaa.com/Gold-Search_Results.cfm?start=1> (24 June 2002).

[29] Malcolm X, Address to African Students Association. Michigan State University. East Lansing. 23 Jan. 1963. http://www.brothermalcolm.net/mxspeeches/1963_MSU_p1.ram

[30] Houston A. Baker, Jr. "Handling "CRISIS" Great Books, Rap Music, and the End of Western Homogeneity" Callaloo 13, no. 2 (1990): 174.

[31] Chuck D, 145.

Chapter 2

N.W.A. The Fathers of Gangsta Rap: Social Demons or Ghetto Narrators?

"It was a highly geared world whose nature was conflict and action, a world whose limited area and vision imperiously urged men to satisfy their organisms..."
How Bigger Was Born, Richard Wright

In the late 1980s, while the majority of black urban youths who were fans of rap music were looking towards politically conscious rap artists such as Public Enemy and KRS-One, silently in the margins of black music a new genre was forming that would forever expose street knowledge and black ghetto experiences to the mainstream. Gangsta rap was a new form of political poetry that rarely addressed in the same fashion the issues of oppression that conscious rap attempted to uncover. Yet, this raw form of poetry depicted the lifestyles of ghettoes across the nation in a less political, but more dramatic form. Gangsta rap took on the responsibility of the masses by narrating the ugly side of black oppression. By presenting real stories in blunt language, rather than looking towards a reformation of bureaucratic ideology, such West Coast gangsta rappers as Ice-T, Too-Short and King Tee, performed in direct conflict with east coast conscious rap artists.

Birthed on the West Coast with rappers N.W.A (Niggaz with Attitude) and Ice-T, gangsta rap artists abandoned the jargon of the black intelligentsia for the common language of the street. Though slang was key in both conscious and gangsta rap, the group N.W.A. would add a new dimension to black music by adopting the somewhat pornographic language that was so prevalent in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of black America. Rarely would conscious rap artists use the word *nigger* and almost never would they be so misogynistic as to refer to women as *bitches* or *hoes*. Gangsta rappers would not only

embrace pejorative phrases, but they also incorporated the use of them in entire songs. How did hearing such traditionally obscene language affect the black community? Did this new poetry of gangsta rap make any impact on the white majority? I contend that gangsta rap not only opened new doors for new black artists, but its popularity crossed over into other musical genres, allowing for an exposure to a new generation of white Americans to recognize an encroaching force of intolerance to racism. In 1989 alone, the sales of N.W.A.'s black gangsta rap increased from the mere 10,000 singles to well over 3 million sales of one album in 1989.[1] At the same time such, white rappers as Vanilla Ice and Third Base found mainstream popularity and radio airplay.[2]

N.W.A. consisted of five young black males from South Central Los Angeles. Though all of the members of the group contributed in some part to the success of the genre, three in particular were instrumental in the popularity of its discourse. Eazy-E (Eric Wright), Dr. Dre (Andre Young) and Ice Cube (Oshea Jackson) were all from middle class homes in the black community. Ice Cube, the poet of the group, wrote the lyrics for most of their songs. And in them, he often expressed to the black community a type of "state of the hood address" that would offer an alternate account of how detrimental the urban living conditions were to the survival of black culture. He created songs that detailed the hierarchical system of the ghetto and did not confine it to the south central Los Angeles community. The songs *Straight Outta Compton* and *Boyz 'N the Hood* were prolific in that sense that it could pertain to any urban community with young black males. *Boyz 'N the Hood* was especially moving because it typifies the mentality of thug life that gangsta rap artists attempted to uncover. In the following excerpt, the narrator Eazy-E of N.W.A. is rather explicit when explaining the daily routine of an unemployed drug dealer/gangbanger. Particular attention should be paid

to the nonchalant language and the apathetic tone that is conveyed to the audience traits which are quite common in a great deal of their songs. This was possibly the first glimpse the entire nation was permitted to witness from a gangbanger's point of view. Up until this point, very few rappers could contextualize the actual dynamics of gang violence:

> Woke up quick at about noon
> Just thought I had to be in Compton soon
> I get drunk before the day begins
> Before my mother starts bitching about my friends
> About to go and damned near went blind
> young niggas at the path throwin up gang signs.
> I ran in the house and grabbed my clip
> With the Mack-10♦ on the side of my hip
> Bailed outside and pointed my weapon
> Just as I thought the fools kept stepping
> Jumped in the 4♥ hit the juice in my ride
> I got front and back and side-to-side♠
> Then I let the Alpine⊗ play
> Bumping new shit by NWA
> It was gangsta, gangsta at the top of the list
> Then I played my old shit it was something like this
> 'Cruising down the street in my 6-4
> Clocking the bitches, jocking the hoes'[3]

The subjects of Ice Cube's lyrics knew no bounds. He often expressed in a strong, booming voice the same discourse that gang members had presented for years. Dressed often in khakis, tee shirts, tennis shoes and dark sunglasses, Ice Cube and the remaining members of NWA represented the visual poverty that was the subject of most of their songs. In direct opposition with the fashionable clothes and the excessive gold jewelry of the East Coast rappers LL Cool J and Run-DMC, NWA and other gangsta rappers portrayed an image that

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♦ **Mack-10**: an automatic assault weapon that gained popularity among gangmembers because of its rapid fire and trajectory. Eventually the sale of all automatic assault weapons was outlawed by various state legislators

♥ **4 or 6-4**; an abbreviated reference to popular vintage automobiles that were customized as low-riders. Usually this type of reference addresses the year of the car example: 1964 = 6-4

♠ **front and back, and side-to-side:** a reference to the hydraulic lifting mechanisms that are used on custom designed vehicles. These mechanisms allowed the car to perform differently by driving on three wheels, hopping in the air, and leaning in various directions.

⊗ **Alpine**: Alpine brand stereo

was to mirror every aspect of street culture. Rap music on the West Coast was used to tell the story of the ghetto masses and took no shortcut in expressions. Ice-T, for instance, describes his style of music in an interview with Time magazine as the following; "[My] rap is based in reality. I don't care what people who don't give me a chance say. I want to create some brain cell activity. I want people to think about life on the street, but I don't want to bore them. I want them to ask themselves 'does it matter to me?'"[4]

It was this very honesty that appealed to NWA's listeners. Never hidden behind political jargon, the first notable characteristic of NWA is the language that they adopted. As earlier noted, NWA infused various expletives with their lyrics which not only allowed more rappers to do the same, but their lyrics were also very striking when it came to delivering the message to its listeners. Because of the often-crass language of the street, critics of the group, including other artists claimed that the group was embarrassing to the black community. With the raw imagery that their poetry brought to the forefront, rap music represented the gang, drug, and prostitution problems of the inner cities. Also, by the group's frequent use of the word *nigger* and exploiting the social problems of the black community, there was a growing fear that the white mainstream would continue to harbor derogatory stereotypes, forcing blacks to lose important but fragile political gains.

In various political petitions spearheaded by political activist and chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women, C. Delores Tucker, rap music underwent immense public scrutiny. Tucker attempted to eliminate rap music from every public forum by labeling it "sinfully embarrassing."[5] She goes on to state, "...hip-hop I have no problem with, gangsta rap I do because you are teaching children how to become a gangster...it tells them how to engage in the culture of gangster lifestyle"[6] With politicians and other activists

such as Maxine Waters, Tipper Gore, and William Bennett, the following statement was a quite common expression on talk shows, in letters addressing music companies, and even an appearance before the United States Supreme Court. Congresswoman Waters states during a 1994 testimony before the United States Congress, "I, like a lot of my generation, was raised to reject any use of the hated pejorative "nigger" being used in reference to me as a person. Black America, as a proud race of people, spent, literally, centuries going from being nigger to colored to Negro to black to African-American; only to be reduced to being a "nigger" again in the scope of a single generation, not as a result of white racism, but through the force of our own people as a result of "gangster" rap music."[7]

N.W.A.'s influence, however, was oftentimes quite different from what some opponents would assume. They presented in their music as a powerful device that is characterized by linguist L.W. Brown as "taking the white man's language, dislocating his syntax, and recharging his words with new strength and sometimes new meaning before hurling them back in his teeth."[8]

By using a keen psychological approach, NWA shocked listeners when they dubbed themselves "niggers." In attempting to "boomerang against racists," the oppressed publicly adopting the language of the oppressors.[9] The word *nigger* had been long accepted within the black community with different connotations, including a term of endearment and as references for humor, yet this was the first time that white Americans heard in popular culture a self-proclamation of such a traditionally derogative term on such a widespread level. What was so amazing about the presentation of the word?

It was the unsettling psychological effect on the listening population that made it amazing. By using or even thinking the word "nigger," the white mainstream bears witness to

the word itself and is then forced to make a correlation between the word and a unified community of black people, who in themselves defined the word as they saw fit. As explained by Randall Kennedy's book, Nigger, "Some blacks use nigger to set themselves off from Negroes who refuse to use it. To proclaim oneself a nigger is to identify oneself as real, authentic, uncut, unassimilated and unassimilable..."[10] I assert that this is N.W.A.'s primary reasons for choosing such an inflammatory term to describe their rap group. Dr. Dre was quoted as explaining why they chose the word "nigger": "I wanted to go all the way left... so I said lets give them [rap fans] an alternative."[11] By abandoning the politically correct pro-Black image of some East Coast rappers, gangsta rappers set themselves apart and made it apparent to all listeners through their use of the word "nigger," that they had no intention of changing.

The word does exist, and though it may not be politically correct, N.W.A. had seemingly initiated a new discussion of a word and connotation that it had long been considered taboo in public. When the former President Bush and other political officials such as William L. Bennett and Maxine Waters were forced to utter the acronym N.W.A. during different testimonies or public addresses, the public recognized the stigma that was attached to the letter *n*. This would mirror the same negative public response that was received by Craig Unger, former editor of the Boston Magazine when he attempted to define the etymology of the acronym HNIC♠ and justify its use after appearing in that publication in 1998.[12] One reader responded by writing an editorial that read, "The title is EXTREMELY

♠ **HNIC**: traditional acronym for "head nigger in charge." This is believed to derive from plantation overseers' delegation of authority to black field hands.

RACIST!!! As a black American, I am outraged and insulted...the title shows your ignorance and indifference to the black community."[13]

The moment some blacks began referring to each other as "N.W.A.s," it could be assumed that in their perspective, this self-accepting, identifying label had now transcended the mere derogatory name and therefore sent some of the white mainstream in a confusing tailspin. Imagine being convinced for a number of years that the use of racial epithets as defined by whites is wrong and then faced with the growing popularity of one of the most inflammatory of them all. This had to be confusing indeed.

Cornel West insists that black people adopt these labels as a way to "protect their bodies, labor, communities, their way of life; in order to be associated with people who ascribe value to them, who take them seriously, who respect them; and for the purposes of recognition, acknowledgment, and to feel as if one actually belongs to a group, clan, tribe, a community."[14] It was the sense of community that the word inspired for some. Though it is still a debatable contention, as evident through the following song by Public Enemy's "I Don't Wanna Be Called Yo Nigga," and A Tribe Called Quest's, "Sucka Nigga", some rap artists have adopted what has been formally viewed by some as a demeaning term, and attempted to transform its connotation into an endearing unification of oppressed people.

I don't want to be called yo niga
Yo niga
Hey
Yo niga
I try to make my statements
Stick like flypaper
Judge says to me yo niga sign these goddamn papers
My boss told me yo niga you're fired
Yo niga this, yo niga that
I know you're a niga now 'cause your head got fat
Flava framalama boy you won't figure
I don't wanna be called yo niga

Yo niga
Break it down
N.I.G.G.E.R.
Niga
Everybody sayin' it
Everybody playin' it rolling on the scales
'Cause everybody's weighin' it
Toby say 'yo I be good niga
Let me get a shovel make a good digger'
I don't care how small or bigger
I don't want to be called yo niga
Yo niga...[15]

Even with this type of sentiment from such an influential group such as Public Enemy, its continued use by other rappers would leave the boundaries of the black community, and seemingly give permission to whites to borrow the word as signifiers for themselves. This in itself is problematic for a nation with a history of racial tension such as the United States. When some young whites adopt the word nigger, it places blacks and whites at risk for attaching the historically demeaning connotation to the word. Dyson contends that " Most white folk attracted to black culture know better than to cross a line drawn in the sand of racial history. Nigger has never been cool when spit from white lips."[16] So we cannot assume that a listener or reader was solely attracted to the use of the word *nigger.* Yes, it caught the mainstream's attention, but I am certain that it was an amalgamation of all the expletives that caught the white public off guard and appealed to the rebellious nature of all rap fans.

Expletives were not new to the genre of music or poetry, but coupled with sexually explicit lyrics, N.W.A. proved too raw for the older public to accept. Laced with street jargon, tales of fornication, teen pregnancy and sodomy were very prevalent and once again embarrassing to some of the middle class black community. In fact in 1994, California Congresswoman Maxine Waters, a member of the Black Caucus, initiated a congressional subcommittee investigation that would eventually attempt to end the so-called pornography

of groups like N.W.A. Addressing a special Senate investigating committee, she encouraged various testimonies to include police officers and other law enforcement authorities that would characterize gangster rap as a catalyst for violent behavior. Sergeant Ron Stallworth of the Gang Intelligence Unit of Salt Lake City, Utah testified that a great deal of new gangmembers primarily "gained their knowledge of gangs [through] a unique and disturbing subculture through the listening of "gangster" rap music."[17] Finally, he added that it was through this type of music that gangmembers "exhibit a psychotic or psychopathic mind-set and is seen as a desirable distinction."[18] This type of reaction was not uncommon among those who found this representation of urban culture objectionable.

There had was no precedence set in popular music that compelled the public to face the real, violent ramifications of the separation of classes and the mistreatment of blacks. Thereby two main perceptions of the music were formed within the black community; N.W.A. was disliked by some because of their hardcore, thug-like image, or they were worshipped by others because of their hardcore, thug-like image. Ice Cube offers insightful commentary in an 1992 interview that "...they [white listeners] listened to my record --- what is happening is they're startin' to see themselves implicated you know and they don't like that, they might be disappointed in who they are..."[19]

No matter how N.W.A. was received, it was riveting songs like "Fuck the Police" and "Boys N the Hood," that voiced the need for black America to unite against some of the warring factions in the ghettoes:

> Fuck tha police and Ren said it with authority
> because the niggaz on the street is a majority.
> A gang, is with whoever I'm stepping
> and the motherfuckin' weapon
> is kept in a stash box, for the so-called law
> wishin' Ren was a nigga that they never saw

Lights start flashin behind me
But they're scared of a nigga so they mace me to blind me
But that shit don't work, I just laugh
Because it gives em a hint not to step in my path
To the police I'm sayin fuck you punk
Readin my rights and shit, it's all junk
Pullin out a silly club, so you stand
With a fake assed badge and a gun in your hand
But take off the gun so you can see what's up
And we'll go at it punk, I'm a fuck you up[20]

It is through lyrics such as those above that illustrated to a man in a Chicago housing project that California, The Land of Milk and Honey, was just as oppressive as his living situation on the South Side. N.W.A. brought young black Americans together in a fashion that would attempt to unify those who are oppressed, but also to grab the attention of the oppressor. This is to say that N.W.A. would not let the mainstream ignore black concerns any longer.

Surprisingly enough, their appeals to the mainstream were not through the traditional stories of victimage; such stories were considered trite and cliché by American society as a whole. The nation had seen the poverty stricken neighborhoods and though it was a regular sentiment to feel sorry for the poor blacks, very little had been reformed as far as the relative improvement in comparison to whites. The United States Census data details that from the year 1940 to 1993, the percentage of white-collar jobs held by white citizens has grown from 30% to 60% and yet the percentage for black Americans has risen from 6% to 46%.[21] Initially, this may appear like a huge jump and improvement for black Americans, but if we analyze the economic growth within the black community in a relative manner, little has changed in comparison to white and Asian-Americans over the latter half of the twentieth century.

It was these types of demographic studies that prompted many gangsta rap artists to write from this marginalized perspective. What Waters and other critics never investigated was the positive influence that N.W.A.'s language and message had on the young black community. I contend that this is the first time since the 1960s that young modern-day followers of black street culture had an opportunity to express themselves without the need of a third party coaching them on what to say and how to transpose their discourse in to the language of the mainstream. By using language that was familiar to black street culture, black listeners and N.W.A. have empowered themselves as embracing one form of *authentic blackness*; a social identifier that could offer a sense of authenticity to black urban culture. I theorize that rap music is established as an alternative to "white" art. I am in agreement with the earlier philosophy of Maulana Ron Karenga when he writes, "...black artists must accept the fact that what is needed is an aesthetic, a black aesthetic...we cannot accept the false doctrine of 'art for art's sake.'"[22]

This particular theory of American identification and citizenship has been debated on a number of levels and strong points have been made about what makes a black person, a black American. Rap is a particular form of black music that participates in the identity formation of postmodern culture.[23] By creating an alternative form of communication and artistry, black Americans have arguably established a rebuttal to the stigmatized label of America's cultural bastards. Because of former enslavement, blacks were denied or gradually lost certain aspects of African heritage, unlike many immigrants who were allowed to retain their sense of nation-state after their arrival to America.[24] However, black Americans are unique in that some created and adopted a new culture that helped them to find a niche or purpose in America, as well as an identifying icon for cultural citizenship. As Henry Louis

Gates argues, " one must learn to be "black" in this society, precisely because "blackness" is a socially produced category."[25] The genre of rap music can be considered one of the many self-produced and self-promoted aspects of black America that help determine the cultural citizenship of black Americans.

Unfortunately, it has been anthropologist Dr. Jorge Klor de Alva's contention that black people have lost the identity of being black because they assimilate or relate so well with white culture and white capitalist ideology. In an interview with Harper's, Klor de Alva asserts that black Americans have long been in a rat race for the same status and material wealth as whites.[26] Therefore, according to Klor de Alva, blacks of today have actually adopted everything that white Americans have held in esteem and thereby have retained or fashioned very few cultural differences to claim as there own. He goes on to state that unlike Latinos and Asians, who can return to their respective countries, black Americans are so culturally removed from African nations that they cannot claim an identifying nation state. It is because of their adoption of Eurocentric ideologies and for the lack of an established nation-state, or affirmed nationality that many blacks naturally identify more with the white mainstream than anything else. Therefore, they can easily fall in to the cultural category of Anglo.[27]

Yet, as indicated in empirical data presented by political scientists Robert Smith and Richard Seltzner, "the ideological cleavage difference between the races is obviously wide and deep."[28] In numerous polls and surveys covering an array of topics from government responsibilities to conspiracy theories, Smith and Seltzer presented data that illustrated the huge disparity between white and black persons opinions. The standard deviation between the two groups would quite often range from 30% to 50%. What Klor de Alva may be

alluding to is what Seltzner recognizes as "the common tradition of liberal democracy and constitutionalism, the tradition of entrepreneurial capitalism and an adherence to common civic culture."[29] Seltzner, however, is not so naïve as not to acknowledge that on certain socio-political issues, black and white opinions are in direct opposition of each other. It is a growing trend that black or white citizens, whether they are active figures, or passive persons in agreement, are influenced by popular figures in the media.

For a great number of black youths, N.W.A. helped to offer a line of demarcation between the assimilated blacks and blacks who remain in a state of protest. The simple act of speaking in street vernacular offered a new perspective of Baker's theory of "crisis" for black youths to initiate. The violence that was portrayed in the music along with the attempt at an apathetic demeanor, helped blacks disassociate themselves from the white mainstream and actually created a great deal of tension between the two groups.

Ice T states that "Rap music is considered more dangerous than heavy metal, even Satan worship, [this] only shows where America's fears lie."[30] It sounds peculiar to read that this uneasiness actually helped blacks; an assumption can be made that because the violence portrayed in the following excerpt can be characterized as a glamorization of violence and gang life style. Yet, it is important to look at the rhetoric from another angle. The following lyrics can be interpreted as to intimidate whites or other cultural outsiders, while simultaneously empowering the anti-assimilationism of the black ghetto. In "Gangsta, Gangsta," it is stated:

> Here's a little something bout a nigga like me
> Never should have been let out the penitentiary
> Ice cube would like to say
> that I 'm a crazy muthafucka from around the way
> Since I was a youth I smoke weed out

Now I'm the muthafucka that you read about
Takin' a life or two
that's what the hell I do
You don't like how I'm living
Well fuck you
This a gang and I'm in it
My man Dre will fuck you up in a minute
With a right, left, right left your toothless
Then you say goddamn they ruthless.[31]

Amiri Baraka, illustrates the same ideology in his black Nationalist poetry of the 1960's. The expressions of violence, police brutality, and revolution was very common during this time and like N.W.A., Baraka's poem, "Black People!", was meant to intimidate white counterparts to the establishment or the maintenance of black cultural pragmatism. The sense of black empowerment is achieved once again through the violent undertones of his message. As with N.W.A. and other gangsta rap artists, Baraka exulted in the strength of black culture and argued that through rebellious discourse, he and other artists could instruct people on how to "fight" for freedom from the chains of exploitation.[32] In the following poem Baraka exhibits the same sentiment that many gangsta artists express. He writes:

You can't steal nothin from a white man,
he's already stole it he owes you anything you want, even his life.
All the stores will open up
if you will say the magic words.
The magic words are:
Up against the wall motherf— this is a stick up![33]

While most of NWA's lyrics were laden with the same violence and expletives as Baraka's poem, they also told a story of the oppressive state of the ghetto and the mind set of some people that lived in those communities. "Fuck the Police" was a song that detailed the martial law-like state of everyday life in the black urban environments. This song resounded throughout the nation's black ghettoes as a new anthem that would condemn the common practice of illegal racial profiling. What can be characterized as uncanny was the accuracy of

the political criticism that was portrayed in the five-minute song. Though it was rather graphic and violent, "Fuck the Police" was almost prophetic in the detailing of the 1991 Los Angeles uprising against police officers. It was so threatening that for the first time in national history, the Federal Bureau of Investigations publicly acknowledged an investigation of N.W.A. and its condemnation of police officers.[34] "Fuck the Police" spoke directly to the concerns of black youths in that it detailed the systematic practices of inner city illegal search and seizures, and the unreported police brutality that was so prevalent. The following lyrics were quite parallel with general sentiment among many black urban males:

Fuck the police
Coming straight from underground
A young nigga got it bad cause I brown
I'm not the other color so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority
Fuck that shit cause I ain't the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
To be beating on and thrown in jail
We can go toe to toe in the middle of a cell

Fucking with me cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searching my car
Looking for the product
Thinking every nigga is selling narcotics

You rather see
me in the pen
than me and Lorenzo
rolling in a Benzo♣
beat a police out of shape
and when I am finished
bring the yellow tape
To tape off the scene of slaughter
still getting swol' off bread and water

I don't know if they fags or what
Searching a nigga down and grabbing his nuts
And on the other hand without a gun they can't get none
But don't let it be a black and white one
Cause the'll slam ya down to the streettop
Black police showing out for the white cop...[35]

♣ **Benzo**: Mercedes-Benz automobile

This song expresses the sentiment that young black men have historically held towards policemen and the justice system. In 1992, after police officers were acquitted of beating black motorist Rodney King, a Washington Post and ABC News poll determined that only 12% of blacks as opposed to 54% of whites, agreed that blacks were treated by police as fairly as whites.[36] This perceptual gap explains why even after the public display of the Rodney King beating and the Los Angeles political uprising, the nation's mainstream still misinterpreted or ignored the concerns expressed by gangsta rap.

N.W.A. and other gangsta rappers were accurate in their portrayal, yet they did not have the political power or influence that many had hoped would come of their rhetoric. Although their lyrics arguably helped the self-esteem of black people, it was not until after the successful crossover of rap into the white community or Ice-T's 1992 heavy metal production of "Cop Killer," a song that depicted retaliatory violence against policemen, that rap gained a political edge. It was through the exposure and acceptance of white fans that attracted a great deal of attention from the political mainstream. While "Cop Killer" was not a rap song, the rhetoric behind the lyrics were startling enough that Time-Warner urged Ice-T to pull the song from the album Body Count. The following lyrics were supported with traditionally heavy metal guitar riffs and heavy drums beats:

> Cop Killer!
> I got my black shirt on
> I got my black gloves on
> I got my ski-mask on
> This shit been too long
> I got the 12 gauge sawed off
> I got my headlights turned off
> I'm about to bust some shots off
> I'm about to dust some cops off
> I'm cop killer, betta you than me
> Cop Killer! Fuck police brutality
> Cop Killer! I know your family grieving -- fuck em!
> Cop Killer! But tonight we get even![37]

With Ice-T's "Cop Killer" and N.W.A.'s "Fuck The Police" and other gangsta rappers such as The D.O.C. and Above The Law, west coast rap made a huge impact on the way music depicted social issues. Rap music and the black community were now a threat to a great deal of white mainstream and this caused a huge uproar within the nation. Doug Elder, president of the Houston Police Officer's Association stated in an interview with Time, "You mix this with the summer, violence and a little drugs, and they are going to unleash a reign of terror on communities all across the country."[38]

Though N.W.A. shook up the nation to a degree, their rhetorical success could not be accurately gauged until after the group disbanded in 1993. After Ice Cube and Dr. Dre left the group over financial conflicts and artistic expression, Eazy-E, leader of the group and probably the most successful at the time, began to gain marginal recognition from political parties. After his $2,500 per plate attendance at the White House for a Republican Party fundraiser, and several disputes over the distribution of N.W.A.'s profits, Eazy's character among his friends and community came into question. When asked about the integrity of Eazy-E in an interview with Vibe magazine, former member of N.W.A. Ice Cube simply responded, "I'll never have dinner with the President."[39]

As far as Eazy-E's response to whether he was a Republican or not, he replied in an interview, " Hell, no, I don't give a shit really. How could I do a song like 'Fuck the Police' and be a Republican? I don't even vote. I just went because those muthafuckers sent me an invitation."[40] Whether Eazy felt a need to consume a costly lunch or felt a genuine connection with the Republican party, following a hostile takeover from present owner of Death Row records Suge Knight, Ruthless Records and a despondent Eazy-E were now

labeled "sell-outs" by many another gangsta artists such as Willie Dee of the Geto Boys[41] and up and coming artists such as Tupac Shakur. In March of 1995, Eazy-E died from the complications of AIDS.

As in many cases, it was not the group itself that made the strongest impact on society. The remarkable accomplishment that N.W.A.'s poetry made to the betterment of society would have to be the living words and the black language that it exhibited to the world. Within a few years of their first release, many young white fans deemed N.W.A.'s language acceptable. Though it has been assumed that the exotically taboo language of the ghettos fascinated white fans,[42] a stronger argument can be made that they found a social connection with the black oppression. The language and descriptions of oppression were no longer exclusive to the black community, but also certain conditions along class lines were addressed. Whites and many other members of different ethnic groups connected with little hesitation with the social and economic concerns of black people. By finding commonalities along the lines of unemployment, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and violence, the progression of society was in direct contradiction with Klor de Alva's claim of blacks following white culture. In fact, whites began to mimic black culture. This argument, no matter how controversial, can explain the phenomenal popularity of white and Latino rap artists such as The Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, Geraldo, Third Base, Cypress Hill and Eminem. Like it or not, sociologist John Hartigan asserts that even poor white persons have now adopted the practice of referring to each other as *nigger.*[43] Keichiro Suzuki, 20, insists in a Time magazine article, "I like black people, and their music because it's cool."[44]

To further illustrate the influence of black hip-hop jargon, a recent linguistic study conducted by Dr. Margaret Lee of Hampton University discovered that among the

professional journalists and publications, the use of black-oriented colloquialisms and the black language that NWA and other rappers helped to present to the mainstream, has increased dramatically within the past decade. In fact, she reports that 40% of black verbal expressions occurred in articles about African Americans, no doubt a way to appeal to the reader and establish a sense of credibility.[45]

With the increased use of phrases such as "You're the man," "I'm just chilling out," and the *Today Show's* Matt Lauer surprisingly shouting out, "You go girl!," it should be no question that black culture and music has had an influence on white media. Lee has also determined that 16% of coined hip-hop phrases have been regularly expressed in the mainstream media and with the popularity of hip-hop and the crossover trend of black music, that number is projected to rise within the next decade.[46] It is because of N.W.A.'s portrayal of reality that the new progressive generation of the 1990s helped initiate an influence on American culture of black expressions.

Nevertheless, N.W.A.'s influence was not always beneficial to the empowerment of impoverished blacks. The lucrative success of N.W.A. and other gangsta artists initiated a trend of black rap music that would eventually embrace drug culture and misogynic ideology. Almost overnight, new artists such as Compton's Most Wanted, Apache, and female artist Boss, would emerge and without any of the political discourse that had previously laid the foundation, build upon an art form that was eventually labeled politically pornographic. In 1992, Apache, of Native-American heritage, would produce the following popular song "Gangsta Bitch" which would epitomize the redefinition of gangsta rap:

> I need a gangsta bitch
> She don't sleep and
> She don't play
> Sticking up girls from around the fucking way

Strapped a lovable heat♣
For her huggable
Always in trouble and definitely fuckable
See her now boobs and pow♦ she's mine friend
Puffing on a blunt♥ sipping on a Heineken♠
Shes got charm, a firearm to match mine
Going to the movies packing his and hers nines
Wearing Carhartt Ω and leather muthafuck the weather
On Valentine's Day doing stick up together
Knowing her brain, no shame in her game
And when we fuck she makes me scream out her name
She's not petty, confident and ready
Right for late night
We play fight with machetes
This goes out to all the gangsta hoe pros
Give me a ghetto girl fuck a Soul Train hoe.[47]

Because of the obvious loss of political focus, rap music lost a great deal of cultural credibility and evolved in a haven for misdirected aggression and haphazard capitalism. Material wealth was to eventually join the lyrical forum of rappers and old fans of the genre found it difficult to identify the new artists with any sense of optimism. The musical genre of rap music took a turn away from the black perspective and began to embrace the material wealth that was so often out of the reach of the middle class population. Large diamonds, expensive cars and lavish homes adorned album covers and were exploited in music videos and thus the artistry of rap music seemed to lose its connection with the lower to middle class black community. Rap producers such as Sean "Puffy" Combs of Bad Boy Records and Percy "Master P" Miller of No Limit Records were notorious for appearing in music videos in convertible Bentley automobiles, adorned in diamond laced Rolex watches while flashing cash and announcing their net worth.

♣ **Heat**: street slang for gun, firearm or pistol
♦ **Pow**: colloquialism for buttocks
♥ **blunt**: marijuana wrapped in the tobacco leaves of a cigar.
♠ **Heineken**: brand name beer
Ω **Carhartt**: brand name clothing designed for cold weather

This trend continued until a new figure rose through the ranks with credentials and lyrical talents that would rival many artists' popularity. He was a charismatic image with a formal theatre background to appeal to the visually stimulated audience. At the same time, he was a son of two Black Panther Party members who would instill the importance of community, not unlike the political agenda of Public Enemy. While embracing the thug life of N.W.A., Tupac Shakur melded these two ideological practices in his lyrics, and was embraced on the hearts of hip-hop fans and fellow rappers throughout the world.

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[2] Mike Rubin, "Beastie Boys" in Vibe History of Hip Hop ed. Alan Light (New York: Random House, 1999), 127.

[3] N.W.A. Boyz N The Hood, 1988

[4] Sally B. Ponnelly, "The Fire Around the Ice," Time, 22 June 1992, 66.

[5] Alex Ogg, The Hip Hop Years. (New York: First Fromm, 1999), 146.

[6] Ogg, 146.

[7] United States. Congressional Informational Services. Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music. 23 Feb. 1994. Lexis-Nexis Universe: Congressional Universe. Online. 30 Apr. 2002.

[8] L.W. Brown, "The Image Makers: Black Rhetoric and White Media." in Black Communication: Dimensions of Research and Instruction ed. Jack Daniels (New York: Speech Communication Assoc.), 32.

[9] Randall Kennedy, Nigger (New York: Pantheon, 2002), 36.

[10] Kennedy, 49.

[11] Coker, 258.

[12] Kennedy, 124.

[13] Quoted in Kennedy, 126.

[14] Cornel West, The Cornel West Reader. (New York: Civitas Books, 1999), 486.

[15] William Drayton, "I Don't Wanna Be Called Yo Nigga," Apocalypse 91, Public Enemy, Def Jam 1991.

[16] Michael Eric Dyson, "Nigger Gotta Stop," in The Source.

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[18] United States. Congressional Informational Services.

[19] Ice Cube, interview by Brian Cross, It's Not About a Salary... (London: Verso, 1993), 207.

[20] N.W.A. "Fuck The Police," Straight Outta Compton 1988

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[22] Ron Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," in The Black Aesthetic ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 32-33.

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[25] Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 101.

[26] West, 500.

[27] West, 505.

[28] Smith, Robert and Richard Seltzer, Contemporary Controversies and the American Racial Divide (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), 28.

[29] Smith, 135

[30] Ponelley 139.

[31] N.W.A. "Gangsta, Gansta" Straight Outta Compton. 1988

[32] Mary Ellison, Lyrical Protest. (New York: Praeger, 1989), 73.

[33] Amiri Baraka, "Black People!" in The Baraka Reader, ed. William Harris (New York: Thundermouth Press, 1991), 224.

[34] Ogg, 118.

[35] N.W.A. "Fuck the Police," Straight Outta Compton, 1988

[36] Quoted in Smith, 121.

[37] Ice-T, Cop Killer, Body Count, Howie Kein, Time Warner compact disc 26878.

[38] Ponnelly, 66.

[39] Mark Williams, "Ice Cold Cube" Vibe vol 2 issue 5, 42.

[40] Cross, 202.

[41] Chuck Phillips "Police Groups Halt of Record Sales" Los Angeles Times 16 June 1992: F1.

[42] Hutchinson, 29.

[43] Kennedy, 12.

[44] Jay Cocks "Rap Around the Globe." Time 19 Oct. 1992: 70.

[45] Margaret Lee, "*Out of the Hood and into the News: Borrowed Black Verbal Expressions in a Mainstream Newspaper*" in American Speech ed. Ronald Butters 1999 Winter 74(4) 385.

[46] Lee, 379.

[47] Apache, "Gangsta Bitch" Apache, 1992

Chapter 3

Tupac Shakur: Black Victim or Strong Soldier?

"Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution."
Black Cultural Nationalism, Maulana Ron Karenga

If there was ever a great rapper and urban icon, it was and remains to be Tupac Shakur. Though his rapping style was not considered as refined as veteran rappers KRS-One and Chuck-D, his impact on American culture can be characterized as immortal. Even after his death in 1995, Tupac Shakur has sold more albums than while he was alive. Where does his longevity come from? Why is he such a popular figure in the works of literature as well as the music industry? If anyone would to attempt to answer such questions with the accuracy that is due, then they are surely up for a feat to match few others. In fact, there have been numerous publications that would attempt to address the questions that I pose, but my purpose does not align with those. I don't wish to deconstruct his life as a troubled, dark, lonely man. Nor is it my intent to point out the trite mistakes and contradictions of Tupac Shakur as have so many other authors. The primary purpose of this chapter is to illustrate or attempt to explain the social impact of Tupac Shakur on American society, despite his shortcomings as a human being. I contend that Tupac Shakur was, and remains an American icon who represents the influential potential of every citizen, while simultaneously standing as an example of talent that is not allowed to mature.

In any case, unlike the dancing of MC Hammer and the adolescent appeal of The Fresh Prince, Tupac's rap performances did not define him as a public figure. It was the heart-felt emotions that were poured into his lyrical poetry and traditional poetry, coupled with the complex whirlwind of his private life, that helped him to grasp a notable position in

the American artistic society. At the same time, his successful, charismatic connection with fans from different backgrounds would allow him to transcend beyond black consciousness and so called "black issues." He would address, but not harp on, issues such as racial profiling, and the South-Central Los Angeles gang violence. Yet, he was also well noted for tackling more class-applicable issues such as poverty, police brutality and censorship. Nikki Giovanni characterizes his appeal as being "... fresh and strong and committed to himself and his people...he was a sensitive soul."[1]

During the rise of gangsta rap music, the public was bombarded by a constant flow of groups that attempted to mimic the gangsta rapping styles of N.W.A and Ice-T. Groups such as Compton's Most Wanted and H.W.A. (Hoes With Attitudes) would attempt to exploit the popularity of graphic violence, expletives and sexually explicit lyrics on different records. Melle Mel, rap pioneer, states of the early 1990s rap, in an interview with author Alex Ogg, "I ain't trying to go back to the ghettos, just to be in the ghettos and live in some fucking tenement with some roaches and that stupid shit. I ain't trying to be out with niggers, drinking beer, smoking blunts --- I did that. That don't get you from point A to B."[2] Though a great number of groups that embraced this mentality emerged with record contracts in the early 1990s, they neglected to address the authentic connection with the urban culture as earlier successful rap artists had done.

Harboring minimal talent and even less audience appeal, strange combinations of what record producers thought was acceptable and what was opposed to reality were very prevalent in the new form of rap music. Such rappers as A.M.G., The Ghetto Twins and the recent group The Hot Boyz, adopted the pattern of rapping about material possessions, as well as about committing horrendous crimes against the unknowing. New York Times

journalist Jon Pareles describes the rap music of that time: "Exploitation...raps about gunplay, with breaks for sex, booze and pot have become bankable, selling beyond the inner cities."[3]

Such songs as "Bitch Betta Have My Money" and "Bling, Bling" exhibit examples of the incredibly shallow lyrics that plagued the gangsta rap genre and contained nothing more than a constant barrage of expletives:

> It ain't nothing like black pussy on my dick
> Word to the muthafuckin' DJ Quick
> I play hoes like dominoes
> slapping punks
> AMG's on the muthafuckin' microphone
> I sling dick bitch
> Nothin' more and nothin' less
> You got a c-note hoe?
> You can take the test...[4]

This was an example of rap's downswing. Even after the rise and the continued success of former members of N.W.A, Ice Cube and Dr. Dre, rap music existed with very little appeal to the expectations of the early-1990s fans. I contend that a sense of reality and historical pride had escaped rap music and the real connection with the urban youth had been lost in the midst of flashy videos and the weekly arrest reports of rappers attempting to live the life that they portrayed on MTV. Yet, with the emergence of Tupac Shakur, the rap industry was once again about to experience a change of face. The new avant-garde figure of rap music was to embody realism, political consciousness and personal charisma that would shoot him past veteran rappers on the circuit and also keep him in the nightly news reports.

Tupac was born in a very modest household and though he was able to earn a formal education at a school of fine arts in Baltimore, Maryland, he also fought the battle of being

raised in a single parent home by a drug-addicted mother. His background most certainly added to the reality of his lyrics and influenced his topics for the duration of his career.

By way of struggles with homelessness, drug addiction, and violence, Tupac embodied some of the identical conflicts that haunted the black community. In an interview with Vibe Magazine, Tupac characterizes his rearing: "I might be my mother's child, but in reality I'm everybody's child. Nobody raised me; I was raised in this society."[5] Tupac was a representative of his childhood roots, and often his lyrics would refer back to those beginnings with social criticism that would rival the most astute philosopher. In the following poem, Tupac expresses his personal sentiments of his oppressive beginnings. And recognizing his own talents and potential, he characterizes himself as "a rose that grew from concrete." The rhetoric that he expresses is consistent in his rap lyrics that follow him throughout his career:

> Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack
> In the concrete
> Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk
> Without having feet
> Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams
> It learned 2 breathe fresh air
> Long live the rose that grew from concrete
> When no one else even cared![6]

The affirmative and ambitious tone of this poem, combined with the aforementioned Vibe interview, is consistent with the tone of a great deal of his musical numbers. It also indirectly challenges linguist and self-proclaimed sociologist John McWhorter's criticism of black victim pragmatism in his book Losing the Race.

McWhorter insists that rappers such as Tupac Shakur, are strong proponents of the harmful ideology of victimage that he coins "victimology." According to McWhorter, Tupac's popularity is exemplary of some blacks' need to claim a position of victimage or a

need to establish a scapegoat for self-induced economic conditions. McWhorter goes on to explain that the black community has mistakenly whole-heartedly accepted Tupac's victimage rhetoric and that his murder in 1996 has now been elevated to an act of martyrdom.[7] Because of Tupac's sacrifice, McWhorter asserts he is adopted by the black community as just another convenient cultural icon of the oppressed black male, fallen victim to "The Man."[8] McWhorter asserts that Tupac's death was self-imposed due to his lack of ambition and the glorification of street life. Because of this lack of motivation, Tupac supposedly supports a pattern of the glorification of despair and stagnation of black progress. Unfortunately, this is not an unusual assessment of black sociology or even of the life of Tupac Shakur. In fact, in many newspaper and magazine articles following his death, it was not uncommon to read eulogies that stressed the troubles that Tupac encountered, while rarely adopting a position of compassion.

McWhorter's assessment of Tupac's roots and performance motivations are mistaken. Tupac rarely shows the signs of black victimage that McWhorter prescribes. I contend that Tupac and his music harbor a sense of resentment for the establishment of American policies that continue the practice of a new world pseudo-caste system. But never does Tupac view himself or the oppressed that he speaks of as being helpless or lacking ambition, which in turn brings about the oppressive positions of poor individuals and minority culture.

In addition, Tupac knew that Public Enemy's strategy of glorifying or addressing Afrocentrism was not what appealed to the majority of American listeners. In fact, I would assert that Tupac would believe that the connection with Africanism would isolate too many white fans, as well as some black listeners who recognized very little connection with Ghana, Africa from their views of Bronzeville, Chicago.

Tupac's concern with focusing on American society was expressed early in his life. In an interview with a high school administrator, a young Tupac questioned the need or benefit of academic concentration in foreign language acquisition, history and other canonized subjects.[9] In fact, he plainly states concerning international affairs, "When am I going to Germany? I can't afford to pay my rent in America. How am I going to Germany."[10] This is a strong indication of Tupac's concern over solving the pressing domestic issues that face black Americans.

In addition, there were many artists such as Queen Latifah, The Brand Nubians and Arrested Development to appease such fans of Afrocentrism. Tupac recognized the need for black consciousness and black pride, but I speculate that he attempted to change and support the collective focus of marginalized communities through a communicative change in the agenda of rap music. As author Toni Morrison argues, "rap music is like a conversation among and between black youth from one part of the country to the other."[11] I believe that the communication between Tupac and his listeners was to address the urgent need of social reform during the early 1990s.

As in so many areas of race discourse, the early 1990's problems of discrimination based on racial identity and ethnicity had been trumped by the new establishment of class and economic conditions. As Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff write in their book, Blacks in a White Establishment, "...institutional racism joins with persisting sex discrimination and class bias in creating a power elite of privileged white males who monopolize positions of decision and influence in every generation."[12] Though Tupac embraced his ethnicity through such songs as "Young Black Male" and "Strictly for my NIGGAZ," his music seemed much more involved with the oppressive nature of bureaucratic

factions and the oppressive nature of the empowered. I contend that he abandoned the popular following of the gang-related rap style that N.W.A. promoted, and embraced a more balanced platform against a conservative America that would deny anyone equal opportunity. As Tupac viewed it, the world did not revolve around the South-Central Los Angeles gang problem and was not confined to the issues of the black community. Instead, he wished to investigate the issues that created the gang problems, as well as the social concerns that seemed to go beyond the urban condition and the black community. He attempted to find the central cog that ran the machine of class division and expose its destructiveness to all persons that were affected by it. In the following poem, Tupac attempts to deconstruct his perspective of the poverty-stricken communities of the nation:

> Life through my bloodshot eyes
> Would scare a square 2 death
> Poverty, murder, violence
> And never a moment 2 rest
> Fun and games R few
> But treasured like gold 2 me
> Cuz I realize that I must return
> 2 my spot in poverty
> But mock my words when I say
> My heart will not exist
> Unless my destiny comes through
> And puts an end 2 all of this.[13]

Quite contradictory to the assessment produced by McWhorter, Tupac does not give his audience a social critique based solely on the oppression of the black community. Instead, Tupac gives the world a critique of the economically disenfranchised in the entire American population. In songs such as "Brenda's Got a Baby" and "Keep Ya Head Up," Tupac addressed the concerns of the impoverished, crime-ridden and the socially isolated members of American society. In the hit rap single "Trapped," Tupac writes:

> You know they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion
> Happiness living on the street is a delusion
> Even a smooth criminal one day must get caught

Shot up or shot down with the bullet that he bought
Nine millimeter kicking, thinking about what the streets do to me
cause they never talk peace in the black community
All we know is violence,
do the job in silence
Walk the street like a rat-pack of tyrants
Too many brothers daily headed for the big pen
Niggas come out worse off than when they went in
Over the years I've done a lot of growing up,
get drunk--throwing up
Toughed up then I said I've had enough
There must be an other route way out to money and fame I changed my name
Played a different game
Tired of being trapped this vicious cycle
If one more (intelligible) harasses me I might go psycho
And when I get 'em I hit 'em with the bum rush
Only a lunatic would like to see a skull crushed
Yo if you're smart, you'll really let me go "G"
But keep me cooped in the ghetto you'll catch the Uzi
They got me trapped![14]

This keen illustration of the social concerns, goes beyond the boundaries of the black community. Instead of the apathetic, defeatist disposition that McWhorter prescribed to some black Americans, Tupac has expressed and personified the very nature of oppression that can be attributed to any home in the class-centered United States. Though it has not been explicitly supported by other scholars during my research, I contend that this is the very reason for Tupac's eloquent expressions within his developmental stage of "Thug Life" music.

"Thug Life", which was a change from his earlier style of political awareness, was leaner style of rapping that harbored a more brazen attempt to organize the oppressed. "Thug Life" gave rise to an angrier Tupac that would eventually take liberty in saying whatever was on his mind regardless if anyone else deemed it appropriate.

This leads me to McWhorter's second mistaken interpretation of rap culture and of "Thug Life." McWhorter asserts that Tupac, just as all gangsta rappers, found himself at a social and intellectual disadvantage because he insisted on "living out" the personified

image of thug life victimage that he presented in his lyrics.[15] Tupac transcends this generalization with the stronger appeal of presenting his critics with an accurate portrayal of public sentiment. In other words, Tupac attempted to tell the stories of the oppressed, as an informal town crier for the masses of individuals in oppressed conditions.

With each confession of subjugation and inequality, Tupac was heralded as a troublemaker and a radical purveyor of violent messages. In response to that popular sentiment, Tupac explains during an MTV interview that "...[a] part of being a thug is to stand up for your responsibilities and say 'this is what I do even though I know people are going to hate me.' I want to be real with myself."[16]

Apparently, "keeping it real" sometimes cost Tupac varied degrees of sympathy when dealing with the press. Following suit with a number of journalist/theorists, The New York Times and The New Yorker both wrote cover stories on the mishaps and life twists that concerned Tupac Shakur. The editorial board of The New York Times published in a brief eulogy: "He had a gift for making enemies...Tupac had become a bogeyman...rap[ping] about too many guns, too many beefs settled with bullets, too few alternatives."[17] Even after his murder, some journalists dismissed his misfortunate death as "the rules of the game."[18] Yet, despite all poor press and the attempt to portray Tupac in a sinister light, the popularity of Tupac Shakur grew and so did the expectations of rap fans that had hoped for a new style of rapping.

One of the tropes that Tupac secured and brought to certain popularity was his "Thug Life" image. As an attempt to legitimize street culture, Tupac created and promoted "Thug Life" as a counter-culture to the privileged white American mainstream. "Thug Life" would not necessarily follow a doctrine of unprovoked violence, as some would assume by the

following lyrics, but it would follow a strong cultural sense of acceptance and unification of traditionally oppressed persons:

> Thug Life
> sharp as a roughneck
> Shakin' the dice, we roll long, ain't nothin' nice
> so the vice wanna follow us around (raize up)
> Got 'em runnin' as we clown thru the town (blaze up)
> Another one, had to throw another gun
> Don't need another case
> you can see it on my face son
> But I ain't fallin' yet
> And I gotta give a shout to where my ball is at[19]

Similar to N.W.A., who would earn popularity from narrating stories from the gang culture of Los Angeles, Tupac's offer of "Thug Life" was created to stand as a direct contradiction to Western social philosophy. In fact, in a change from his earlier interest in international issues, Tupac and his crew often paid subtle homage to foreign nation heads by adopting secondary stage names. Those crewmembers that were labeled as "Soldiers on the Streets," also heralded performance names such as Khadafi, Napoleon, Hussein, Mussolini, and Idi Amin. These names would stand as figurative reminders that Thug Life disciples would represent a covert sentiment that some critics could label un-American. In the poem "Liberty Needs Glasses," Tupac explicitly expresses his dismay with controversial issues and historically oppressed political figures that have held views in direct contradiction to American social practices:

> Excuse me but Lady Liberty needs glasses
> And so does Mrs. Justice by her side
> Both the broads R blind as bats
> Stumbling thru the system
> Justice bumped into Mutulu and
> Trippin' on Geronimo Pratt
> But stepped right over Oliver
> And his crooked partner Ronnie
> Justice stubbed her toe on Mandela
> And liberty was misquoted by the Indians
> Slavery was a learning base

Forgotten without a verdict
While Justice was on a rampage
4 endangered surviving Black males
I mean if anyone really valued life
And cared about the masses
They'd take 'e both 2 Pen Optical
And get 2 pairs of glasses.[20]

The preceding poem embodies a feeling of isolation that so many economically repressed persons harbor. "Thug-Life" addresses those concerns and offers a solution as the socio-biological assumption that there is survival in numbers.

By promoting the ideology of "Thug-Life," Tupac may have recognized a primary theory on the survival of human beings. As a twist on the theories of Darwin's "survival of the fittest", Tupac realized that the survival technique for any animate being in a weakened state is the gang-like grouping in numbers. This is the basis for "Thug-Life." Though Tupac may not have been aware of the long-term ramifications for promoting "Thug-Life," namely his death and the controversies surrounding it, it is plausible that he was keenly aware of adopting this technique of "reactive intergroup aggression," a socio-biological survival tactic that is utilized by ants, bees, birds and even humans.

Biologist Johan M.G. van der Dennen explains that the "grouping" of animals is a natural occurrence and is often overlooked behavior in humans. He writes, "This form of aggression may be [utilized]... as acts, or the threat of acts, of an individual organism to reduce the fitness of, or enhance its own fitness at the expense of, another individual."[21] This theory can explain Tupac's reliance on the existence of others as a supportive rubric for his survival and the uplifting of oppressed persons.

Sociologist Gina Barclay-McLaughlin also theoretically explains the root and the detriment of this social phenomenon in modern-day urban environment. She explains that

this act of social sub-grouping as in "Thug-Life" is a classic model of *communal isolation.* She writes in her essay, "Communal Isolation: Narrowing the Pathways to Goal Attainment and Work," that "neighborhoods experience communal isolation when people are denied access to a communal system of support."[22] Support in this sense could be characterized as older mentors and positive role models in the community. I will add that without support from communal elders, a deficiency can occur and subsequently lead to youths in search for a support within their own sub-community or niche; giving rise to gang-life or "Thug Life."

Barclay-McLaughlin's research supports my hypothesis by asserting that these neighborhoods, which find its inhabitants behind locked doors and without community involvement, are often tyrannized or plagued by gangs.[23] Could this be a method of continued existence within one's own community? Could it be that Tupac was not aware of his own participation in a social behavior that stems from simple adaptation to survival? Of course, this could be the very reason Tupac seems to never truly abandon the practice of "Thug Life" and seems so contradictory in many of his interviews.

In a 1995 interview with Kevin Powell, writer for Vibe magazine, Tupac expresses that "That "Thug Life" shit...I did it, I put in my work, I laid it down, but that shit is dead. Let somebody else represent it, because I'm tired of it."[24] Yet, on the subsequent 1996 "Makaveli" album entitled *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory,* he seems to embrace the Thug Life motif in the introduction with lyrics that an interview with the following lyrics:

> ...In every city
> I'm looking for trouble
> right behind me is my outlaw niggas down to die for me
> know what I mean
> I hit the scene ...
> kicking high let me see the sunrise and fall
> this for my dogs down to die for y'all

extreme venom
no mercy
when we all up in 'em
cut 'em down
to hell is where we send them.,
my whole team...
thug life running through my veins so I'm strong[25]

Thug-life was not something that a person could abandon easily, especially when it is a natural dynamic used for survival. This widely accepted socio-biological call for endurance is what can be used to discredit McWhorter's crudely constructed argument against grouping or what he may term as "ganglife." I assert that Tupac's narratives of "Thug-Life" and of oppressed situations are not simply fantasies-come-true. They are, instead, a firmly legitimized methodical approach to human existence that McWhorter and his supporters refuse to acknowledge. For McWhorter or any reader to ignore this simple structure of economic stratification and social survival would be an irresponsible and misleading detriment to American society.

The McWhorter argument of black victimage can be dismantled because it is confined to the victim or the disenfranchised and it lays no equal social responsibility at the feet of the privileged or the persons in power. Furthermore, within his argument, McWhorter directs his energy towards the dynamics of black rappers such as Tupac Shakur and his proposed lack of communal responsibility. To accept this theory of victimology would mean to dismiss all theories that support the antithesis of "victimology." As written in Robert Staples' Black Masculinity, it is the racism, sexism and lack of opportunity that give rise to crime in the black community.[26] The peripheral macho gang-like activity of "Thug-Life" is only a conditioned response to the need for equality and the expression of what Staples terms as "the manhood hustle."[27] Yet, Tupac expresses his own social rebuttal and rhetorical

critique in his song, "Words of Wisdom." The following monologue mimics certain sentiments within the black community and can be transposed by many persons throughout the entire United States:

> Killing us one by one in one way or another
> America will find a way to eliminate the problem
> one by one the problem is the drugs and the black
> youth of the ghetto and one by one w are being
> wiped off the face of the earth at a extremely
> alarming rate and even more alarming is the fact
> that we are not fighting back. Brothers, sisters, niggas.
> When I say nigga is it not the nigga that we have
> grown to fear it is the word nigga that we say has
> no meaning but I say it means; Never Ignorant Getting
> Goals Accomplished –N.I.G.G.A.'s
>
> Niggas what are we going to do? Walk blind into a
> lie or fight? Fight and die if we must! Die like niggas.
> Amerikkka, Amerikkka Amerika-ka-ka!
> I charge you with the crime of rape murder and assault for
> suppressing and punishing my people. I charged you
> with robbery for robbing me of my history. I charged
> you with imprisonment for keeping me trapped in the
> projects and the jury finds you guilt on all accounts.
> And you are to serve the consequences for your evil
> schemes. Nightmare! That is what I am. I am what
> you made me. The hate and the evil that you gave me.
> I shine as a reminder of what you have done for my
> people for 400+ years. You should be scared. You should
> running. You should be trying to silence me. Ah, but
> you cannot escape fate. For it is my turn to come. Just
> as you rose you shall fall by my hands. You reap what
> you sew.[28]

The popularity of Tupac is amazing. I contend that his persona, and his social appeal helped to establish and maintain such a powerful relationship with listeners. His rap performances, including the dances and videos, were secondary to the heartfelt emotions that were poured into his song lyrics and poetry. Tupac was as genuine as most musical artists and as indicated earlier, he did not hide his concerns about the black community, or other oppressive communities. Yet, he did attempt to appeal to the expectations of his fans. As indicated

earlier, Tupac's music and his rhetoric subscribed to a more economic concern over the distribution of wealth and social services than a racially motivated division within the American society. Tupac belonged to the black community, but his sentiments in his songs transcended ethnicity in a way that Public Enemy failed to accomplish. Tupac was an open rapper who allowed his listeners to peer into his life and his innermost thoughts. His belting of fiery lyrics was a clear indication of his true feelings, and the perceptive listener keyed in to that fact.

Unlike previous rappers who could force the issue of violence or regurgitate tones and expressions that were heard in previous rap songs or in previous speeches, Tupac created his own genre and rapper persona out of real emotions and personal reflections. One of Tupac's closest friends, publicist George Pryce speaks of the impact Tupac made on his followers. In a VH1 interview Pryce states, "He had some old wounds, and I don't mean literally, even though he had them literally. Just wounds of the mind and heart from things that happened in the past. When he finally got an audience, or he got an avenue with which to speak out, he did, and he did it in a very short length of time which overwhelmed people."[29]

Despite being arrested and convicted in 1992 for sexual abuse, Tupac's appeal strengthened with every release of catchy lyrics that would please the palate of urban listeners. Looking closely at the lyrics, the listener could easily discern that Tupac was not a man who would openly advocate unprovoked violence. Instead, Tupac tried to represent the idea of authenticity in the community. By orchestrating the strong amalgamation of black cultural awareness pioneered by Public Enemy and the gangsta street savvy of N.W.A., a new form of rap music was birthed. From the pen and lips of Tupac Shakur, rap was taken in another artistic direction, much like the change from the Harlem Renaissance to Black Arts

Movement. Chuck D. of Public Enemy admits the same assessment in his book, Fight the Power." He states that, "Tupac had loyalty to Black people without a doubt. His early albums sound like a combination of Public Enemy and N.W.A. He was raw."[30]

By presenting his ideology with such a charismatic appeal and with his complex approach to deciphering class issues, Tupac has assured himself a place among the larger population of urban blacks who found legitimacy in viewing rap music as an accurate barometer of urban culture.

[1] Nikki Giovanni, "Foreword: Tupac C U in Heaven," The Rose that Grew from Concrete, (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), xvi.

[2] Ogg, 146

[3] Jon Pareles, "How Real is 'Realness' in Rap," New York Times, 11 December 1994, pH34.

[4] A.M.G. Bitch Betta Have My Money 1990.

[5] Kevin Powell, "This Thug's Life," in Tupac Shakur ed. Alan Light (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 25.

[6] Tupac Shakur, "The Rose that Grew From Concrete" The Rose that Grew From Concrete, (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 3.

[7] John McWhorter, Losing the Race (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 44.

[8] McWhorter, 44.

[9] Thug Angel: the Life of an Outlaw, pro. and dir. Peter Spirir, 92 min., Image, 2002 videocassette.

[10] Michael Eric Dyson, Holler If You Hear Me (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2001), 78.

[11] Dyson , 114.

[12] Richard Zweigenhaft, Blacks in the White Establishment (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 16.

[13] Tupac Shakur,"Life Through My Eyes'" The Rose that Grew From Concrete, (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 11.

[14]Tupac Shakur "Trapped," 2pacalypse Now! 1991

[15] McWhorter, 42.

[16] Quoted in Dyson, 113.

[17] Jon Pareles, "In One Death, Mirrors of our Times," New York Times, 22 Sept. 1996, pH30.

[18] David Van Biema, "What goes 'round...." Superstar rapper Tupac Shakur is gunned down in an ugly scene straight out of his own lyrics," Time, 23 Sept. 1996, 40.

[19] Tupac Shakur, "Stay True", Thug Life Volume I, Thug Life Music, Jive Compact Disc 41635.

[20] Tupac Shakur, The Rose that Grew From Concrete, (New York: Pocket Books, 1999), 135.

[21] Johan M.G. van der Dennen, "Nonhuman Intergroup Agonistic Behavior and 'Warfare'", The Origin of War: The Evolution of a Male-Coalitional Reproductive Strategy, March 1995, <http://rint.rechten.rug.nl/rth/dennen/animwar.htm> (20 June, 2002).

[22] Gina Barclay-McLaughlin, "Communal Isolation: Narrowing the Pathways to Goal Attainment and Work" in Coping with Poverty, ed. Sheldon Danzinger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000),54.

[23] Barclay-McLaughlin, 54.

[24] Powell, 50.

[25]Tupac Shakur, "Street Fame," The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory, 1996.

[26] Robert Staples, Black Masculinity (San Francisco: Black Scholar, 1982), 141.

[27] Staples, 139.

[28] Tupac Shakur, "Words of Wisdom," 2Pacalypse Now, 1990.

[29] Spirir

[30] Chuck D. Fight the Power, (New York: Delta Press 1997), 3.

Conclusion

Public Enemy, N.W.A. and Tupac Shakur have not only stirred perspectives of the urban community, but with their political and social discourse, they have also challenged the nation's philosophy of what is acceptable in the social mainstream. I hope that by deconstructing their lyrics and attempting to document their influences, I have unearthed a great deal of controversial topics.

I have to acknowledge and admit that I sincerely believe that the Public Enemy's ideal of pluralism, exhibited by the change of agenda in their music, was a strong detriment to their popularity. Though the American creed suggests that all men are created equal, I don't believe that anyone can truly claim that they are. In the real world, just as depicted in literature, drama and music, there will always be a hierarchy of privilege. So how can anyone, especially Public Enemy, believe in an ideology that all humans will ever be on the same level of advantage, with opportunities to achieve the "American Dream?" This is a fallacy. Unfortunately this is also a fallacy that African-Americans have historically accepted. The rhetoric of such a misleading ideology has long been presented in lectures from Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King to Kwiesi Mfume. These historical black leaders suggest that black Americans should always strive to attain a level playing field that would parallel their opportunities to succeed alongside other ethnic groups. This is a wonderful concept that earlier rappers like Public Enemy attempt to express. But it calls for a collective effort and a certain degree of trust in white mainstream principles. This trust is what hurt their influence in the black community. Chuck D. will certainly disagree with my claim. In fact, I speculate that he would cite his lecture schedule as evidence of his staying power. But I present, as evidence to counter his argument, the successful genre of gangsta rap

and groups like N.W.A., which have out-lived political rap by at least three times its existence.

With the emergence of N.W.A., gangsta rap took the art form of political rap to a different level; a level that would challenge our own black communities and present a representation of the crude young black male groomed by American society. Compounding the 1990s increase in policemen unlawfully harassing young black males, the scarcity of jobs that could be earned independent of formal education, and the fact of the increasing number of incarcerated black males, American society was grooming exactly what N.W.A. was exclaiming: NIGGERS!

America reaped exactly what is sewed, a defiant, angry, vengefully intelligent citizen that oftentimes would see no connection with the mainstream culture. Because of this social isolation from what they saw as an "American Dream" and full inclusion, some black Americans who were rap fans, found a visual connection with N.W.A. N.W.A. was now a representation of black ghetto culture that some could maintain stood out as a boil on the pristine face of America. I assert that just as blacks during the 1950s found some peculiar sense of pride by exposing America's civil rights violations through television and newspapers, they also cultivated the same sense pride when the black gangsta image took over the nightly news, or even when a car stereo blares "Fuck the police!" at the red light. N.W.A. picked up the plastic Uzis that Public Enemy dropped at the scowl of the Jewish Anti-defamation League. Though the gangsta image may have helped the esteem of some black Americans, it also stood as a negative stigma etched in the mind of a great number of white Americans. Tupac Shakur attempted to exploit that very stigma to a point where listeners would question the appeal of the gangsta lifestyle or Thug Life image.

N.W.A. may have adopted the sense of "crisis" as a weapon against racial and social strife, but Tupac wielded the weapon in a more effective manner. Instead of standing as an example of an angry black male with no direction, Tupac explicitly explains through his lyrics how blacks could remain just as fiery as early Public Enemy and still exist as "authentic" as N.W.A., but still gain a foothold on the figurative "American Dream." Though Tupac faced many obstacles and fought with the problems that come with existing as a musical superstar, he still remained quite grounded with his purpose of supporting the oppressed without maintaining racial divides.

Throughout the American literary history, African Americans have contributed a bonanza's worth of expressive, complex art through written text, as well as in the oral tradition. Blacks are heralded throughout the world for their new and recycled use of art that they regularly produce. Yet throughout most of my adult life, rap music, another form of art, has not been supported or embraced with the same zeal as Dunbar's poetry or Morrison's novel. I present that a peripheral purpose of this thesis was to enlighten you, the reader, of black arts and rap music standing as living motivators and influences for a global population.

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